Research Note

L'Dor V'Dor: Creating Comfort and Sharing Traditions in a Disembodied Time

By: Rachelle H. Saltzman

Abstract: During the seemingly endless pandemic years of 2020-21, the very act of making traditional family foods became an obsession for many. It is in the doing, the making of recipes, especially those from deceased family members, that we embody and thus perform our cultural heritage. Further, when we gift those labor-intensive foods to distant family members, we not only provide comfort for them, but we also create it for ourselves.

Keywords: foodways, Jewish food, comfort food, pandemic, COVID-19, embodiment, family food

It is a cultural and religious imperative for Jews to pass our knowledge and traditions on to our children and grandchildren, the stories that are told and retold, *l'dor v'dor* (trans. from the Hebrew, "from generation to generation").[1]

A conversation with folklorist Lucy Long a few years ago prompted me to think about "frameworks for exploring food narratives that go beyond just the consumption of food, to acknowledge the ways in which food connects into other domains of life" (Long 2020). Long was talking about Thanksgiving, traditional family foods, and the stories that such holiday gatherings and foods generate—in some ways as opposed to the conversations about decolonization that have consumed so many of us over this admittedly emotionally and politically fraught holiday. I immediately thought of Passover, which evokes similar ritual work and involves layers of narratives and the requirement that we retell the story of Exodus in every generation. This essay is in response to those thoughts, which started as an elaboration on an assignment in my foodways class on comfort and/or discomfort family foods. It has turned into a folklorist's reflection on "comfort food as a personal and aesthetic response to the pandemic" (Long 2022). As Long has said, meaningful foods evoke narratives.

Nearly all Jewish holidays encode Jewish cultural history. To celebrate Passover and Chanukah,[2] for example, requires that we recount two of the foundation stories of the Jewish people and how we came to survive against all odds. Passover, in particular, is replete with iconic foods that serve as metaphors for key concepts and prompts for the annual retelling of the history of how we came to be who we are, as well as ways to encode our own values. The holiday requires that we re-enact and retell the origin narrative (Fredman 1981) of the Jewish people with a *seder* (trans. from the Hebrew, order). The seder is the ritual meal served in a particular order as outlined in the *Haggadah*, the "guidebook" (see figure 1) that provides instructions and commentaries as well as blessings, songs, and games.[3] A seder plate (see figure 2) provides the literal setting for the key food symbols and indicates with pictures and Hebrew labels what goes where. Such foods provide emotional sustenance because they provide spiritual sustenance; they are imbued with meaning and carry family histories and memories as well as cultural history

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writ large as part of their essence. Without them, there is no structure to carry the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, through time and the generations (Sherman 2002). There is a cultural imperative to having such foods in our lives and in very specific ways. As we re-enact our peoplehood, we also reproduce our own families and our relationship to the whole—concepts that change but still move from generation to generations, *l'dor v'dor*.

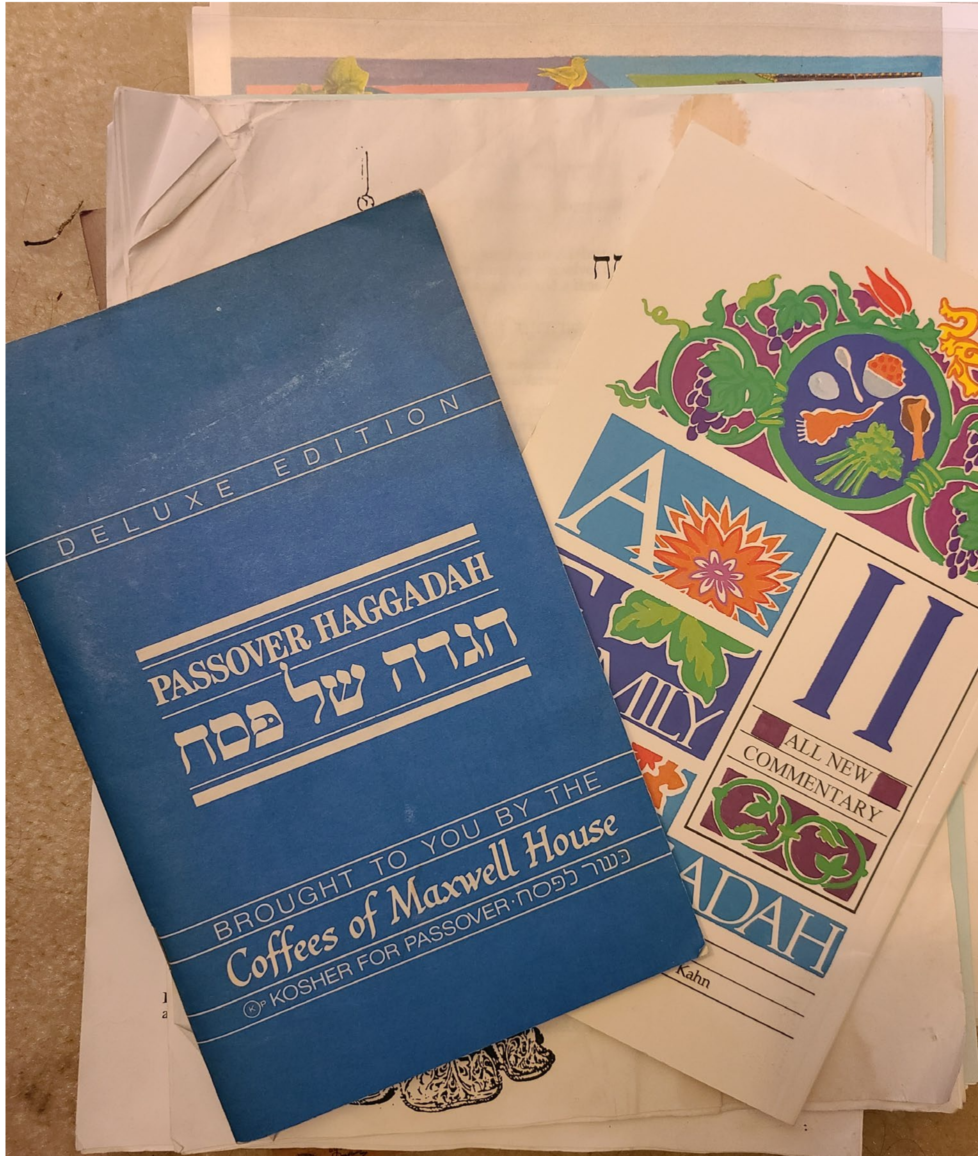


Figure 1: Haggadot
Photo by the author

Figure 2: Seder plate with symbolic ritual foods
Photo by the Author

Besides the *Haggadah*, the ritual guidebook for the seder, there are several ritual objects that amplify and serve as prompts for the "official" version. They provide openings for alternative, even contestational, narratives—about the environment, civil rights, our responsibility as Jews for *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), refugees, and more. The seder plate, which provides the literal setting for the key food symbols, can be a piece of high art, a family heirloom, or a child's craft rendition (see figure 3); it has both virtual images and their Hebrew names to indicate placement for the real/symbolic food. As those gathered for the holiday go through each prescribed step of the meal, the Haggadah prompts us to point to each food as its role in the tale unfolds.

Figure 3: Eva's Passover Plate
Photo by the author

For individual families, there are myriad variations on just about every element of the Passover seder. Individuals, families, cultural groups, corporations (most famously, Maxwell House®), feminists, and political organizations create their own *Haggadot* (plural of Haggadah)—sometimes with explicit but often with implicit motivations (see figure 4).

Figure 4: Global Justice Haggadah
Photo by the author

Various versions of a *Women's Haggadah* (Broner and Nimrod, 1994) started emerging in the 1970s (see figure 5); later additions such as Miriam's Cup (of water) (see figure 6) on the seder table in 1994 (companion to Elijah's Cup of wine) and then an orange to the seder plate (1980s) illustrate the emergent nature of the holiday (see figure 7). The latter references a modern legend that a rabbi proclaimed in reaction to the ordination of women rabbis that "a woman belongs on a *bima* [pulpit] the way an orange belongs on a Seder plate."

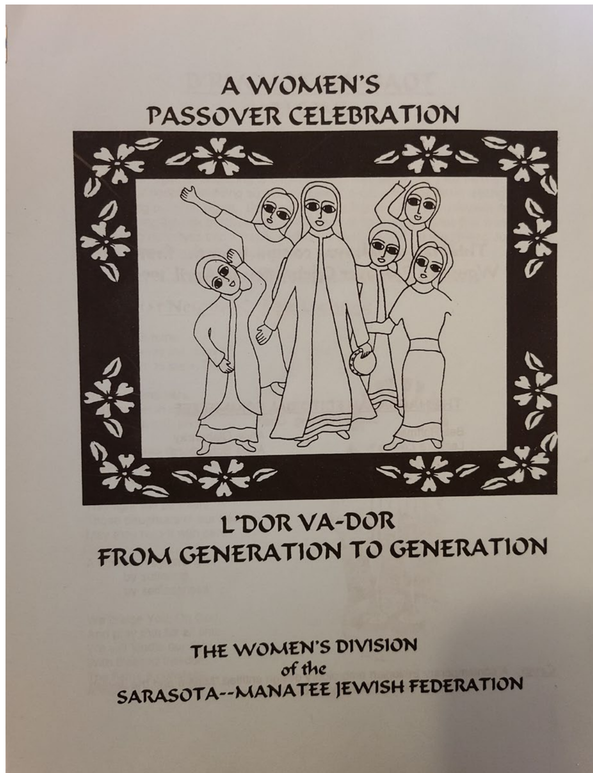


Figure 5: Women's Haggadah
Photo by the author

Figure 6: Miriam's Cup
Photo by the author

Figure 7: Closeup of our Passover plate with a silver Miriam's cup (next to traditional Elijah's cup of wine) and an orange.
Photo by the author

For my own extended family, seders are redolent with family recipes from Lithuania via my maternal grandmother, some from Mollie Katzen's *The Enchanted Broccoli Forest* cookbook (1982), and others from a couple of generations of American-born foodies. They are also the site of family lore from my grandparents' generation at seders over 60 years ago; then from my parents, aunts, and uncles; and now from my cousins, me, and our children. The requisite ritual four cups of wine inevitably created spills and drips on wine-stained tablecloths as well as on the Haggadot, different editions that rarely matched each other for my childhood seders. Family members would chime in with stories about previous holidays—in Lithuania, at my maternal grandmother's, at my aunt's, and, more recently, at my cousins' home in Oregon. After those long ago seders as well as at High Holy Day meals

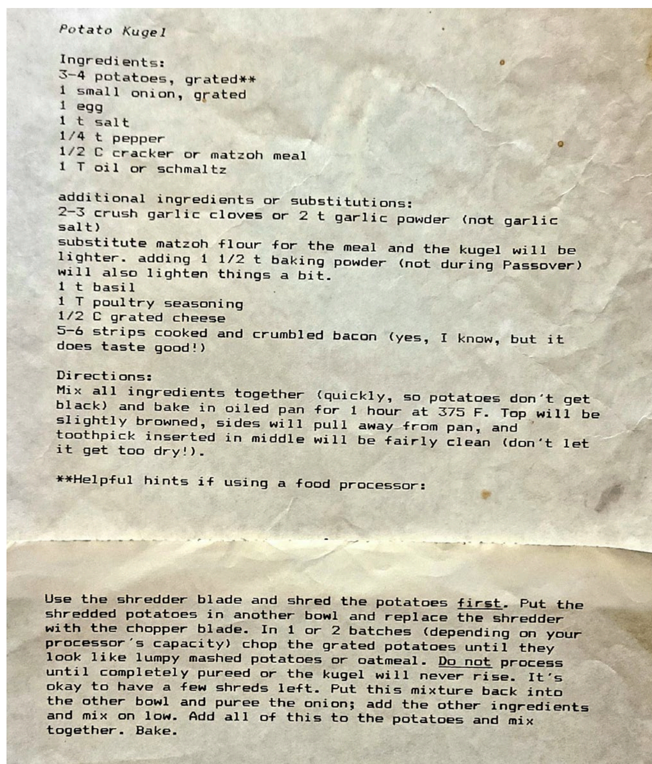
at my grandmother's, someone would haul out the old photos—from Lithuania and from my mother's, aunt's, and uncle's childhoods—all prompts for pre- and post-immigration family stories about gatherings, family characters, and food—always food, and stories about food. There was even a running joke during those annual seders that involved someone asking my grandmother where the string beans were (Ashkenazic Jews do not consume legumes on Passover because they could ferment); she didn't have much of a sense of humor and always rose to the bait with annoyance. Today, at my cousins' more politically explicit seder in Silverton, Oregon, we use revised versions of their 1980s' homemade and equally stained set of Haggadot—full of references to revolution, prayers for resolution of the middle east conflict, pleas for refugees' asylum, and social justice (see figure 8).

Figure 8: Silverton Haggadah
Photo by the author

One of my family's most emotionally-laden foods is *tzimmes*. In our tradition, tzimmes is a slow-cooked sweet and savory vegetable stew flavored with *flanken* (beef short ribs). It traditionally contains sweet root vegetables. In medieval Germany, these included parsnips and turnips (Marks 2010), then carrots sweetened with honey in the fifteenth century, and other vegetables added over time and space: white potatoes, honey, plums, or apricots in nineteenth-century Russia and Poland, and sweet potatoes as well as brown sugar and cinnamon once vast numbers of Ashkenazic Jews fled Eastern Europe for the United States (Nathan 2020).

My grandmother always made tzimmes for significant Jewish holidays—Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), for which sweet foods like apples and honey are emphasized to ensure a sweet year ahead, and Passover, which necessitates fiber-rich dishes to counter the effects of too much matzoh. Tzimmes was always more a special occasion dish—its very name means "make a big fuss" in Yiddish. And it can be a very fussy, time-consuming dish to make. I remember from those childhood seders that my maternal grandfather, my uncle, my father (who liked to make trouble), and one of my cousins would play fight over the scarce bits of tzimmes *fleisch* (literally flesh or meat). Tzimmes fleisch carried a lot of symbolic weight in terms of defining our family relationships; after my grandfather's death, my grandmother would serve it first to her son, my uncle, and then to other family members in order of seniority.

My grandmother also made potato *kugel* (pudding), which was cooked nestled into the soupy top of the tzimmes pot and steamed along with it. According to Joan Nathan (2020), this was indeed a Lithuanian Jewish version. Ordinarily, potato kugel—consisting of grated potatoes, onions, matzoh meal, eggs, salt, pepper, and chicken *schmaltz* (fat)—would be baked in the oven along with a chicken or beef brisket. It was special but not as special as the tzimmes, at least for some of the family. My older cousin and I vastly preferred the potato kugel itself—a recipe I made sure to get (see figure 9)—though I found myself in later years figuring out how to make tzimmes—for reasons that will make sense later.



Potato Kugel

Ingredients:
3-4 potatoes, grated**
1 small onion, grated
1 egg
1 t salt
1/4 t pepper
1/2 C cracker or matzoh meal
1 T oil or schmaltz

additional ingredients or substitutions:
2-3 crush garlic cloves or 2 t garlic powder (not garlic salt)
substitute matzoh flour for the meal and the kugel will be lighter. adding 1 1/2 t baking powder (not during Passover) will also lighten things a bit.
1 t basil
1 T poultry seasoning
1/2 C grated cheese
5-6 strips cooked and crumbled bacon (yes, I know, but it does taste good!)

Directions:
Mix all ingredients together (quickly, so potatoes don't get black) and bake in oiled pan for 1 hour at 375 F. Top will be slightly browned, sides will pull away from pan, and toothpick inserted in middle will be fairly clean (don't let it get too dry!).

**Helpful hints if using a food processor:

Use the shredder blade and shred the potatoes first. Put the shredded potatoes in another bowl and replace the shredder with the chopper blade. In 1 or 2 batches (depending on your processor's capacity) chop the grated potatoes until they look like lumpy mashed potatoes or oatmeal. Do not process until completely pureed or the kugel will never rise. It's okay to have a few shreds left. Put this mixture back into the other bowl and puree the onion; add the other ingredients and mix on low. Add all of this to the potatoes and mix together. Bake.

Figure 9: Potato Kugel Recipe from Ida Sachs
Photo by the author

My grandmother's tzimmes never included the traditional prunes, and I was surprised to find many years later that a recipe in Katzen's quasi-vegetarian *The Enchanted Broccoli*

Forest cookbook recipe (1982: 204) does include prunes, which work as both a sweetener and as a substitute for meat in terms of flavor and texture. I don't like prunes, but I thought I'd give this a try and was surprised to find it to be pretty good. I told my mother, who loved prunes, about the fruit's inclusion, thinking this a great discovery. Apparently not! My mother explained that my grandmother never included prunes because my aunt disliked them. For my family, prune-less tzimmes IS traditional.

Many years ago, when I was taking folklore classes in college, I interviewed my grandmother about her foods—the ones she made for her three children, their spouses, and her seven grandchildren who all lived within five miles of each other. She kept her recipes—clipped from the *Forverts* (*The Jewish Daily Forward*, a Yiddish newspaper), *Hadassah Magazine*, and various American women's magazines—in a thick *pekl* (bundle) wrapped with a rubber band. She stored the bundle in her purse so that the recipes she didn't carry in her head were always with her when she visited her children and their families on alternating weekends. To capture recipes for the dishes from her mother and others that were only in my grandmother's head, I'd watch her and write down what she was doing. The tzimmes recipe was one of the unwritten ones. I never saw her making it, and I never thought to ask her about it. That was a source of much annoyance for my maternal aunt, who, over the years, has tried mightily to replicate it. Her version is rather soupy and doesn't include the potato kugel on top. My own mother never prepared it, but since I've hosted Passover seders over the years and gone to Rosh Hashanah potlucks, I found myself committed to making it, even though I don't really like it. But it represents tradition and family holiday meals to me—perhaps more than to others—so making it was a way of carrying on that tradition.

My occasional tzimmes is a combination of my taste memory of my grandmother's with Katzen's ingredients. Following my own preferences, I have never made it with meat. I do use prunes—though not all the sweet spices that Katzen includes, such as cinnamon, nutmeg, and so on—I have stuck to my family's aesthetic of savory rather than sweet. And I make the potato kugel on top. More recently, I served a deconstructed tzimmes with chunks of sweet potatoes, carrots, prunes, and white potatoes tossed in garlic oil and roasted together with some butter, salt, and pepper, but sometimes it's just roasted sweet potatoes (see figure 10).

Figure 10: Roasted sweet potatoes
Photo by the author

These days, I don't always make the potato kugel because my husband and daughter don't really like it. And I don't do the more complex version that combines tzimmes and kugel when I've taken the dish to my cousins, who live over an hour and a half or so away from us in Oregon (see figure 11).

Figure 11: Tzimmes with kugel chunks
Photo by the author

I have sometimes made and brought a separate potato kugel, but no one but me seems all that interested in it. My cousin, who prepares a massive seder (see figure 12) each year for dozens (many not Jewish), relies on me to make a more or less traditional tzimmes that for her side of the family (her paternal grandfather and my maternal grandfather were brothers). It doesn't seem to include the kugel that steamed on top of the pot of tzimmes.

Figure 12: Cousin's seder table
Photo by the author

In 2020, however, COVID-19 changed so much of our lives. At the very start of the pandemic and lockdown, my cousin cancelled our annual Passover seder, which had for years been a gathering of four generations of extended cousins (see figure 13). My cousin, who takes great pride in her generous and inclusive gatherings suggested a summer seder—surely the virus would have run its course by then.

Figure 13: Cousin's plate with matzah, homemade gefilte fish and beet-sweetened horseradish, and hardboiled egg
Photo by the author

We couldn't skip Passover, and so I found myself making the seder just for the three in my immediate family: my husband, daughter, and me. Some honest conversations revealed that none of us really liked tzimmes. Instead, we preferred the simpler roasted root vegetables—as long as they were somewhat caramelized. I cooked for several days, and we tried to enjoy the meal, but doing so with such a tiny group felt incomplete (see figure 14).

Figure 14: Our seder table set with my grandmother's glass Passover dishes
Photo by the author

Phone calls with distant friends and family to compare notes on what we made and how we celebrated the seder helped to simulate a sense of togetherness, but the calls really weren't

enough. We found, though, that the food was critical. The specific dishes, which are symbolic for Jews in general, and those other foods, which are symbolic of family heritage for me and my relatives, were necessary for the ritual to be comforting. For me, personally, the potato kugel is the ultimate holiday comfort food; and this particular year, I needed the comfort, so I did make it for myself even though no one else wanted it. Alas, I neglected to photograph it.

A few more months into the pandemic, and my uncle unexpectedly died—of COVID as we later learned. Another month, and my mother passed away, the day after her 99th birthday. My brother, daughter, and I were with her at the end, and we spooned her favorite coffee ice cream into her mouth—comfort for us in providing her with this treat and, we hoped, for her, as a sensory pleasure. Her death was not unexpected, but it was still difficult; because of the pandemic, her assisted living facility hadn't allowed to visit her until near the end. Over the ensuing months, as it became apparent that the pandemic was not going away anytime soon, I found myself thinking about holiday baking for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year in the fall (see figures 15 and 16),

Figure 15: Apples and honey
Photo by the author

Figure 16: Apple cake with caramel and walnut topping
Photo by the author

and then for Chanukah in December (see figure 17).

Figure 17: Latkes
Photo by the author

And what brought me comfort was to cook and bake many of my grandmother's recipes, like chicken soup (see figure 18) and challah (special braided egg bread for shabbat) (figure 19).

Figures 18 & 19: Chicken soup with matzah balls; Challah for shabbat
Photos by the author

I have always observed being Jewish via food—both eating and cooking--and the losses of this year made doing so an imperative rather than a choice. I wasn't thinking about the why; I just knew that I needed to make my grandmother's holiday treats, the comfort foods of my childhood.[4] My grandmother, like many of her generation, did not follow written recipes, though she always had that ever-present rubber-banded bundle in her purse. My

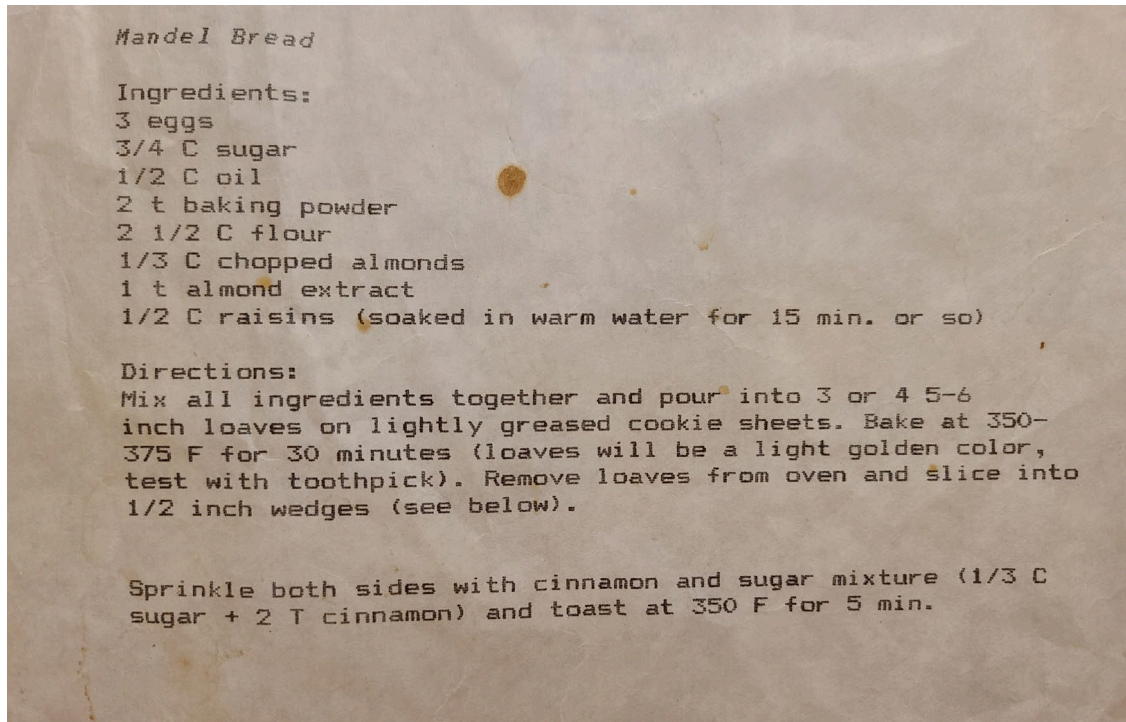
brother and I each had our favorites—mine were *rugelach*, rolled up crescents of cream cheese and butter pastry filled with ground cinnamon and nuts plus raisins. My aunt introduced the idea of raspberry jam, and we all embraced it, though my grandmother always complained about it; rolling up sticky dough spread with jam is a messy business, especially in warm, sticky weather (see figure 20). A traditional Chanukah treat, she also made them especially for my birthday in June—definitely an act of love to do so during the high humidity summers in the mid-Atlantic states.

Figure 20: Rugelach with raspberry jam (left) and cinnamon, sugar, and ground pecans (right)
Photo by the author

My brother's favorites were *mandel* (almond) bread, similar to biscotti (see figure 21), and what we called pink and white cookies, basically a butter cookie batter mixed with dried candied fruit, baked in strips, cut into bars, and iced with pink and white frosting (see figure 22). I had the recipes for both of his favorites, but I'd made the pink and white cookies only once before and never made the mandel bread [see figure 23]. Rugelach were always my favorite and my specialty.

Figure 21: Mandel bread
Photo by the author

Figure 22: Grandma's frosty fruity bars
Photo by the author



Mandel Bread

Ingredients:
3 eggs
3/4 C sugar
1/2 C oil
2 t baking powder
2 1/2 C flour
1/3 C chopped almonds
1 t almond extract
1/2 C raisins (soaked in warm water for 15 min. or so)

Directions:
Mix all ingredients together and pour into 3 or 4 5-6 inch loaves on lightly greased cookie sheets. Bake at 350-375 F for 30 minutes (loaves will be a light golden color, test with toothpick). Remove loaves from oven and slice into 1/2 inch wedges (see below).

Sprinkle both sides with cinnamon and sugar mixture (1/3 C sugar + 2 T cinnamon) and toast at 350 F for 5 min.

Figure 23: Mandel bread recipe by Ida Sachs
Photo by the author

I took on the personal challenge of baking all these cookies, keeping some for my daughter and husband, sharing some with local Jewish friends, and shipping off care packages to my brother and his family, my aunt, and my cousin, who, like my Jewish friends, well understood why they were meaningful and appreciated my efforts. As with the labor-intensive *hamantaschen* (trans. from the Yiddish, Haman's pockets—circles of rich, rolled dough, filled with a mixture of dried fruits and nuts or a poppy seed mixture, and pinched into three-cornered little tarts) that I make each year for Purim (see figure 24), it made no

emotional sense for me to share with those who didn't understand the work involved in making these treats as well as the symbolic resonance for our common Jewish identity. The meaning would have been diluted into the more pervasive sharing of holiday cookies that happens among many American families in late December. I found immense comfort from not just making these family sweets for myself, my husband, and my daughter, but especially from sharing them with far-away relatives who had experienced the same years of family holidays and the emotional warmth they created. Even sweeter was their thanks—my brother texted upon their arrival, "totally awesome. Great timing too. I'm tasting the love and warmth. Thank you all so very much!" My aunt texted, "your cookies arrived in great condition, and I've tasted the mandel bread—excellent!"

Figure 24: Hamantaschen
Photo by the author

The comfort those foods offered was not just from the foods themselves but also from making and then sharing them with others. Folklorist Chrissy Widmeyer (2021) writes about a related concept,[5] which she calls "performative intimacy, … the means through which relationships are performed into being" in reference to the group work involved in making family foods and the community work in making and gifting potato pies for a group of African American women—in both cases, sharing and thus performing, reaffirming, and recreating community. African American Jewish food scholar Michael Twitty also embraces the idea; for Twitty, food is about family: absent, extended, past, and present. For his

research on the African roots of southern cuisine, he almost religiously tries to replicate those dishes as his ancestors would have prepared them on southern plantations. To become who we are is to embrace this actual embodiment of making and sharing food, an act made both more difficult and more powerful in the absence of bodies during this virtual world in which we all seem to dwell.

Our family holiday traditions have changed from the ones of my childhood. It's no longer the old photos that trigger stories and memories but the foods themselves, even if we don't always have the same dishes. During most of the pandemic, my aunt, my cousin, and I had phone conversations and Zoom meetings to consult about recipes and preparation methods—memories substituting for real life gatherings. But the stories continue, though evoked by different foods now and different issues. To be "strangers in a new land," as the Israelites were during their generations' long sojourn in Egypt, means more to my husband, daughter, and me after our migration to Oregon a decade ago. And the ritual themes of the seder conversation—social justice, hunger, and what it means to be Jewish in the world today—means we are talking about COVID, the unhoused, Israel, the elections, and previous seders when we could all be together.

These ritual holiday meals and our family foods have sustained us, yet during this endless pandemic time, sharing culturally symbolic or any foods has become challenging. At the same time, the very act of making traditional family foods has become an obsession for many, as it has for me, even though the sharing itself is most often virtual—via photos on social media and comparing recipes on Zoom screens. It is in the doing, the making of recipes as well as the sharing of family stories, which enables us to embody and thus perform our cultural heritage, even in the absence of face-to-face contact. And when we gift those labor-intensive foods to distant family members, we not only provide comfort for them (perhaps more so for ourselves), but we also recreate that heritage for ourselves. The narratives are embedded in the foods, stories about our elders and of their migrations, descriptions of times gone by, the tastes and smells encoded in the memories of past meals. With each generation, the story is remade and retold, *l'dor v'dor*, from generation to generation. We continue to seek relevance as we make our own places in the recounting, and watch our children take over and weave their own threads and food traditions into this creation story, our own virtual palimpsest.

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[1] From the second commandment given to Moses on Mount Sinai, "Though shalt have no other Gods before me," which is iterated in Exodus, and elaborated upon in Deuteronomy, 6:5-9 (starting with the V'ahavtah), "You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. *Impress them upon your children*…" [italics added for emphasis] (tbs-online.org n.d.). And see Deuteronomy 4:9, Based on Deuteronomy 4:9, "*And make them known to your children and to your children's children*" [italics added for emphasis] (Durff 2016).
[2] Chanukah commemorates the successful rebellion of the Maccabees against the Seleucid Empire and the Greeks in the 2nd century BCE and the subsequent rededication of the 2nd Temple.
[3] While Passover commemorates a solemn history, there is much room and even encouragement in the Haggadah and during the seder for merriment, joking, and drinking games—the required four cups of wine do rather encourage the irreverent features of Passover. And the games, stories, and songs help to keep the children involved and entertained during what can be a long evening.
[4] I refer here to the concept of comfort food that Michael Owen Jones and Lucy M. Long articulate in their introduction to Comfort Food: Meanings and Memories (2017).
[5] "In another case, I examine how a community group gifts sweet potato pies to build relationships across gaps in their community, engaging in an African American and southern food tradition and using intimate performatives to achieve social justice goals. The group insists that pies must be accepted with an understanding of the dialogue they are meant to initiate. Accepting pies when they are given, for instance, to the victims of police violence and the police themselves allows the pies to bring two sides of the community together for discussion" (Widmayer 2021).

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