

A Million Matzo Balls

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/million-matzo-balls>.

Introduction

Passover, or "Pesach" in Hebrew, is a major Jewish holiday that commemorates the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt. Celebration of the holiday is centered on a night of ritual called a seder, which includes blessings over special foods, a retelling of the story of the Exodus, and a festive meal. On Passover, Jews traditionally refrain from eating leavened bread, and instead eat matzo, a thin, crisp, unleavened bread, in memory of the Israelite slaves, who, according to a tradition, did not have time to let their bread rise as they ran from Pharaoh towards freedom.

Making use of this symbolic, unleavened bread, Ashkenazic Jews developed the matzo ball, or, in Yiddish, "knaidel": a small dumpling made of seasoned matzo meal bound together with egg and some kind of fat, today often vegetable oil or vegetable shortening, but in the past usually schmaltz (poultry fat). In Europe, dumplings were first seen in Italy; they later made their way to Central Europe, and ultimately became popular among the Ashkenazic communities who lived there and elsewhere. These Jews referred to dumplings as "knaidlach" (singular "knaidel"), deriving from the German *Knödel* (cognate to the English "knot"). During most of the year, Jews made dumplings from bread, flour, or cheese, but during Passover, they substituted matzo, and eventually soup with these dumplings became a central dish at the Ashkenazic seder.

Up until the twentieth century, matzo balls were made from crumbled pieces of matzo and they were eaten almost exclusively at Passover. But in the early twentieth century, the Manischewitz company introduced packaged ground matzo meal and promoted matzo balls as a year-round food in order to promote sales of the product. With the promotion of convenient pre-prepared matzo meal, the matzo ball reached mass popularity and became an iconic Jewish food.

This kit examines literary, culinary, and cultural representations of the matzo ball, in order to explore its enduring status and importance within modern Jewish communities and its connection to Jewish identity.

At right: Matzo ball soup as served at a delicatessen. Photo by Laurel Natale, from pexels.com.

Subjects

America, American South, Food, Jewish Holidays, New York, Yiddish

Reading and Background:

- Gil Marks's *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* (2010) contains a thorough culinary and cultural history of matzo balls in the entry "Knaidel/Kneydel." This 2010 [interview](#) with Marks in *The Forward* may help teachers discuss the question "What is Jewish food?" with their students.
- To gain perspective on certain Jewish foods, like the matzo ball, considered especially iconic in New York, read Jennifer Berg's "From the Big Bagel to the Big Roti? The Evolution of New York City's Jewish Food Icons" in *Gastropolis: Food and New York City* (2008).
- Teachers may find Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's article, "The Kosher Gourmet in the Nineteenth-Century Kitchen: Three Jewish Cookbooks in Historical Perspective" (1987), useful background for teaching *The Jewish Manual* (London: 1846), an excerpt of which is the first resource in this kit.
- Those interested in reading more about the I. L. Peretz story "A *shmues*" ("A Conversation"), an excerpt of which forms the second resource in this kit, may wish to turn to Jordan Finkin's *A Rhetorical Conversation: Jewish Discourse in Modern Yiddish Literature* (2010), which includes a discussion of the story on pages 114-128.
- Joni Schockett's "Recipe for Matzah Balls" from the website My Jewish Learning has a few variations on the recipe, and renowned American Jewish cookbook author Joan Nathan makes matzo balls in this [New York Times cooking video and recipe](#). She flavors her balls with schmaltz (rendered poultry fat, once a staple of Ashkenazic cuisine), along with nutmeg



and ginger (as in the recipe from *The Jewish Manual*). Dan Gritzer puts some matzo ball recipe myths to the test in “Myth Testing: The Secrets of the Best Matzo Balls” on the website Serious Eats.

Resources

1: Recipe, Lady Judith Cohen Montefiore's "Matso Soup," 1846.

The first Jewish cookbook written in English is *The Jewish Manual; or, Practical Information in Jewish and Modern Cookery with a Collection of Valuable Recipes & Hints Relating to the Toilett*. Though the only authorial information given is “Edited by a Lady,” the book is believed to have been written by Judith, Lady Moses Montefiore, wife of the world-renowned British Jewish financier and philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore (see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “The Kosher Gourmet in the Nineteenth-Century Kitchen: Three Jewish Cookbooks in Historical Perspective”). The two were among the wealthiest and most prominent Jews of their day, and were passionately devoted to Jewish communal causes. Lady Montefiore helped to establish cooking schools for poor Jewish girls, who could then work as cooks in Jewish households, and this cookbook might have been used in such schools.

Published in London, *The Jewish Manual* includes recipes from Sephardic, Ashkenazic, and other Jewish regional traditions. The author assumes that the reader has been frustrated by non-kosher cookbooks, and takes on the task of transcribing and simplifying “all the best receipts, hitherto bequeathed only by memory or manuscript, from one generation to another of the Jewish nation.” She aims to bring Jewish cooking up to the quality acceptable for “the cuisine of a woman of refinement,” with “a pervading air of graceful originality.”

This recipe includes suet, the hard white fat found on beef kidneys and loins. Suet (*khelev*) is today considered a forbidden fat in Jewish law, because it was offered as a sacrifice at the ancient Temple in Jerusalem (Leviticus 3:3–4). Despite this, it played a prominent role in nineteenth-century British Jewish cooking, in which it was used as a kosher alternative to lard.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to discuss what we can learn about people from a recipe. What do the ingredients tell us? What do the instructions about the time and effort of preparation tell us? Compare this recipe to a contemporary recipe for matzo ball soup, or to your own memories of eating it, preparing it, or seeing it prepared. What has changed and what has stayed the same? What does the use of suet — which today is not considered kosher — tell us about how Jewish food practices have changed over time?

Source: Lady Judith Cohen Montefiore (presumed), “Matso Soup” in *The Jewish Manual; or, Practical Information in Jewish and Modern Cookery with a Collection of Valuable Recipes & Hints Relating to the Toilett* (London: T. and W. Boone, 1846), 9-10, digitized by the Internet Archive at <https://ia600205.us.archive.org/0/items/jewishmanualorp00manugoog/jewishmanualorp00manugoog.pdf>, accessed March 1, 2018.

2: Short story excerpt, I. L. Peretz's “A Conversation,” 1900, in Yiddish with English translation.

I. L. Peretz (1852-1915) is one of the founding and most important writers of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature. In this story, two older Hasidim, Zerakh and Shakhne, who had once been students of different Hasidic sects, have a conversation about competing religious values and beliefs. Because the conversation takes place during Passover, it focuses on the relative importance of the Haggadah — the book read aloud during the Passover seder — and knaidlach. To the men, these two items serve as stand-ins for the soul, represented by the book, and the body, represented by the dumpling. Their conversation, based as it is on the tangible objects of the Haggadah and knaidlach, simplifies abstract religious concepts, taking them out of the realm of Rabbinical texts and placing them into the day-to-day speech of friends.

In this excerpt, Shakhne insults the Hasidim of Kotsk by saying that they “don’t care much for the Haggadah, only for the knaidlach,” referencing the Yiddish aphorism “*Me meynt nisht di hagode, nor di kneydlekh*” (“One thinks not of the Haggadah, but rather of the knaidlach”), used to refer to a person who concentrates only on pleasures and not on responsibilities. Zerakh then turns the phrase on its head, insisting on the value of the knaidlach. Ultimately, the two men are not arguing about food and text but rather about what it means to be a Jew, and whether a Jew must, or even should, engage in celebration.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students the following questions: what point is Zerakh trying to make to Shakhne with this reference to the Torah: “You shall not return a runaway slave to his master”? What does the knaidel represent in this passage? What does the Haggadah represent?

Ask students: how do you weigh the relative importance of the Haggadah and the knaidlach in your own conception of Passover?

Divide your class in half and ask one half to list reasons why the Haggadah is more important, and the other half to list reasons in favor of knaidlach. Have the class conduct a Haggadah vs. knaidlach debate.

Sources: I. L. Peretz, "A *shmues*," in *Khsidish (In the Hasidic Manner)* (Vilna: *Vilna farlag fun b. kletskin* (Vilna Publisher of B. Kletskin), 1915), 148-149, digitized by the Yiddish Book Center at <<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc204311/peretz-isaac-leib-hsidish>>, 148-152, accessed March 1, 2018.

I. L. Peretz, "A. Conversation," trans. Ruth R. Wisse, in *The I. L. Peretz Reader*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 181-184.

3: Speech excerpt, Bernard Manischewitz's "America's Influence on Jewish Cooking," 1956.

Manischewitz, alongside other Jewish food producers, played an important role in standardizing and popularizing certain Jewish foods in the twentieth century. The B. Manischewitz Company began as a matzo factory in Cincinnati in 1888. Its founder, Behr Manischewitz, developed innovations in the mass production of matzo and promoted square machine-made matzo as more religiously pure than traditional, rounded handmade matzo. Later, the company promoted matzo balls as a year-round Jewish food, not limited to Passover, in order to increase sales of its matzo meal. Bernard Manischewitz, Behr's grandson, was the last member of the family to preside over what became a kosher food empire. He delivered the speech excerpted here at a symposium convened on the theme, "Jewish Life Reflected in Jewish Foods," delivered at Hunter College on March 6, 1956.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students what they think Bernard Manischewitz means by "more earthy manifestations of the Jewish soul." What does this phrase suggest about how Manischewitz thought non-Jews perceived Jews? What role might Manischewitz's desire to sell his products play in this speech? Do you agree with him that "getting to know a people's food" can lead to understanding of the group itself?

If you want to talk about the style of food description in this passage, ask your students to think about these phrases: "gently luscious," "tempting plumpness," "feathery," etc. Ask them what kind of feelings and associations those descriptions evoke for them. Are they appealing? Cliché? Silly? Have them compare this excerpt to a contemporary food description from a culinary magazine or restaurant review and ask them to identify ways in which the rhetorical style and the approach is similar or different. How might they themselves describe the sensual pleasures (or lack thereof) of matzo ball soup?

Source: Kerri P. Steinberg, *Jewish Mad Men: Advertising and the Design of the American Jewish Experience* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 99.

4: Poem, Yosl dem grinem's "Pesach Rhymes," 1956, in Yiddish with English translation.

This poem, "*Peysekhdike gramen*," printed in the Yiddish daily newspaper *Forverts*, envisions Cold War politics as an argument about matzo balls. It was part of a regular column of comic rhyming poems published under the pseudonym *Yosl dem Grinem*, or "Yosl the Greenhorn."

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to discuss what makes this poem work as a piece of humor: is it simply that it replaces bombs with matzo balls? Is it because it makes the world conflict domestic and Jewishly ethnic? Does it trivialize the nuclear arms race? Does it mock Jewish culinary arguments, which may get ramped up out of proportion to their actual importance? Or perhaps it does both?

Invite your students to write a comic sketch or poem that rewrites a contemporary public debate to be about matzo balls. Ask students: what associations or ideas does the matzo ball conjure, and how can they make use of these connotations in their comic writing?

Source: *Yosl dem grinem* (Yosl the Greenhorn), "*Peysekhdike gramen*" ("Passover Rhymes") in *Forverts* (New York: January 4, 1956), digitized by the Historical Jewish Press Project of the National Library of Israel <<http://www.jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=FRW%2F1956%2F04%2F01&id=Ar01406&sk=E2CA873C>>, accessed March 1, 2018. Translated by Jessica Kirzane.

5: Comic monologue excerpt, Samuel Chanis's "A Lesson on Knaidlach," 1978, in Yiddish with English translation.

Samuel Chanis was an author of humorous sketches printed in American newspapers and read on the radio. In this closing

excerpt of one of his monologues, he jokingly posits the origin of the matzo ball.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students where they think the origins of knaidlach likely lie, or ask them to discover the answer by reading the "Knaidel/Kneydel" entry in Gil Marks's *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* (2010). Why would this author comically posit that they have ancient, biblical origins? Is he saying that culinary and textual identities should have (or do have) similar weight for Jews? Or that matzo balls are as fundamental to Jewishness as Moses and King Solomon? Assign your students to write their own joking origin stories for the knaidel.

Source: Samuel Chanis, "A lektsiye vegn kneydlakh" ("A Lesson on Knaidlach") in *Tsu shmeykhlen un tsu lakhn* (*For Smiling and Laughing*) (Brooklyn: Published by the author, 1978), 141. Digitized by the Yiddish Book Center at <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc201739/chanis-samuel-tsu-shmeykhlen-un-tsu-lakhn-a-zamlung-fun-50-umoristishe-monologn-un>, accessed March 1, 2018. Translated by Jessica Kirzane.

6: Menu, Carnegie Delicatessen and Restaurant in New York, 1985.

The Carnegie Deli opened in 1937 in midtown Manhattan across the street from the concert venue Carnegie Hall. The restaurant's opening took place, at a time when American Jewish delis were being established in great abundance all over the United States. Eastern European Jews built upon Central and Eastern European food traditions, both Jewish and non-Jewish, in developing the uniquely American creation of the Jewish deli. The Carnegie Deli was known for its oversized portions and the celebrities who frequented it, until it [closed in 2016](#).

On this menu, three variations of matzo ball soup are offered as everyday dishes, not restricted to Passover. They appear in the second column of this menu, under "Soups." For less than a dollar, one could get a simple chicken consommé with rice, kasha, noodles, or matzo balls. The more elaborate variations – with all the fixings – appear in their own special curlicue-bordered boxes. These are: "Boiled Beef Flanken in the Pot with Matzo Ball, Noodles, Consomme and Garden Vegetable, \$2.35" and "Chicken in Pot with Matzo Ball, Noodles, Consomme and Jardiniere Vegetables, \$2.30." The other soups on offer are "Puree of Tomato Soup with Rice" and "Cold Borscht with Boiled Potato and Heavy Sour Cream."

Suggested Activity: Ask your students: what are some things that you notice about this menu that might tell you something about the people who created it, the people who ordered from it, and the era in which they lived? What, if anything, about this menu strikes you as Jewish? Note that the Carnegie Deli was not a kosher establishment (see "Hot Virginia Ham Sandwich," among other items), though for some people it was an iconic Jewish landmark. Ask your students what might have made this deli a Jewish space, if it was one. What other spaces do they think of as Jewish, and what makes them so? Would matzo ball soup on the menu make any restaurant a Jewish restaurant?

Source: Carnegie Delicatessen and Restaurant, Menu (New York: 1985), digitized by the New York Public Library, http://menus.nypl.org/menu_pages/53157/explore, accessed March 1, 2018.

7: Poem excerpt, Herschel Silverman, "Cittee, Cittee, Cittee IV," 1996.

Herschel Silverman (1926-2015) befriended iconic fellow poets of the [Beat generation](#), such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, and Charles Olson, and was deeply influenced by their work. An owner of a candy shop in Bayonne, New Jersey, Silverman participated in the spoken word poetry scene of 1960s Greenwich Village, in Manhattan.

This is the fourth in a series of poems about the texture of life in New York City, often referencing foods as a way of highlighting the city's diversity and as part of the play with language. (A longer excerpt of the poem, including this passage, may be found in an [article](#) at the website Literary Kicks, and the book containing the entirety of the series may be ordered [online](#). To see and hear Silverman's delivery style, watch a portion of this YouTube [video](#), which, from 2:50-6:00 captures the poet reading a different passage from "Cittee, Cittee, Cittee," while walking about the titular city, accompanied by clarinetist Perry Robinson. Note that the passage he reads contains some profanity, so teachers should preview it for themselves before making the decision on whether to show it to their classes.) This installment of the poem was written in commemoration of the [1996 murder of Abe Lebewohl](#), the owner of New York's Second Avenue Deli, who turned the small operation into a kosher institution of New York. In the poem, Silverman evokes the ever-changing liveliness of New York City. He lists details that attest to the city's character, knaidlach among them, that are especially but not exclusively culturally Jewish in nature.

Suggested Activity: Have a few students read this poem excerpt out loud, in as rhythmic and expressive a way as they can. First, have them examine the way the poem sounds. How would they describe it? How might the aural qualities of the poem mimic the sounds of New York City?

Then delve into the content. Where do knaidlach fit into this list? Are they part of the cutting-edge nature of the city? Of traditionalism? What does it mean for knaidlach to be floating in the city, rather than the soup? What does the inclusion of knaidlach in this poem tell us about knaidlach as an iconic Jewish food and as an iconic New York food? What does this tell us about the relationship between Jewish food and New York food?

Source: Herschel Silverman, "Cittee Cittee Cittee IV" in *Lift Off: New and Selected Poems, 1961-2001* (Marlborough, MA: Water Row Books, 2002), 129-132.

8: Radio segment excerpt, "Southern Jews Put Their Spin On Soul Food" on "Faith Matters," NPR, 2010.

Marcie Cohen Ferris, a professor of American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is the author of *Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South* (2005), an examination of Jewish food history and culinary practices in the American South based on archival research and interviews. In *Matzoh Ball Gumbo*, Ferris examines how Jews who did and did not keep kosher reinvented European Jewish culinary traditions to merge with Southern cuisine.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students if they consider this matzo ball gumbo to be a variation on a "traditional" matzo ball soup, or to be something else altogether. How far can a variation go before it is no longer recognizable as matzo ball soup? Ask your students to think about the way Ferris and Michel Martin, the interviewer, talk about matzo ball gumbo. Why does the dish seem unusual to Martin? And why does it sound more familiar or worthy of celebration to Ferris, who grew up Jewish in Blytheville, Arkansas? What does the host's reaction to this dish tell us about what some people think "Jewish food" is or where it comes from? What might this synthesis of iconic Ashkenazic and Louisianan dishes represent for the people who prepare or eat it, or for Ferris, who chose it as the title of her book on Southern-Jewish foodways?

Source: Michel Martin and Marcie Cohen Ferris, "Southern Jews Put Their Spin On Soul Food" on "Faith Matters," *NPR*, December 3, 2010, digitized at < <https://www.npr.org/2010/12/03/131784968/Southern-Jews-Put-Their-Spin-On-Soul-Food>>, accessed March 1, 2018.

9: Film excerpt, Janicza Bravo's "Lemon," 2017.

Janicza Bravo, an American writer, director, and photographer, says of herself that she "might be the only black, Panamanian, Jewish woman working in comedy." Her work is designed to make audiences uncomfortable and to mock comedic conventions as it explores questions of race and privilege. *Lemon* is a bleak comedy film about a fragile, mediocre guy and the inherent privilege he enjoys as a white man. It is intentionally, hilariously awkward.

The song "A Million Matzoh Balls," by New Jersey-raised singer-songwriter Dean Friedman, occurs at the end of a scene of family conflict that takes place over a Passover seder. It contrasts the light and fluffy matzo balls, and the children's music, with the weightiness of the seder and the deep tensions within the family, including over issues of race. The bright, silly song, stands out in the otherwise acerbic, understated film. Bravo first heard the song at a friend's seder, and she knew it had to be in one of her movies. As she said in an [interview](#) with online magazine *Vulture*, "It's so great and so ridiculous and so lovely."

Suggested Activity: Ask your students: what is the tone of the lyrics and what is the tone of the visual appearance of this scene? Do they jive with or contradict each other, and how do they contribute to the humor of this clip? Why, in particular, do you think it is funny or effective for the song to be about matzo balls (rather than simply matzo, for example)? Is there something comic or endearing about the matzo ball that inspires the song's inclusion in this film and in all the other sources in this kit?

Source: Janicza Bravo, director, *Lemon* (USA: Burn Later Productions, Killer Films, CYRK Productions, 2017), film. Excerpt posted March 8, 2018, by *Vulture*'s YouTube channel at < https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLZQfnFyelTBOQ15kmHSgEbdjzLMWzZpL7&time_continue=26&v=de9_89Thbv8>, accessed March 18, 2018.