

Jewish food and the Midwest are two historical topics that are not often in conversation with each other, despite a broad and diverse Jewish population that existed and continues to exist today. This paper, entitled “Open for Business: Jewish Food Entrepreneurship in Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth century Iowa,” will be the one of the first of its kind to document the intertwining relationships between U.S. Jewish history, food and foodways, and midwestern history as it relates to the construction of Jewish communities in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and their upkeep through the interwar period. It will explore the roles that food and foodways (which I define as the interrelated system of cultural, social, and economic practices revolving around food, its procurement, and consumption) played in the construction of midwestern Jewish communities, ranging from small, rural towns with small Jewish populations to medium-sized and larger urban areas with much larger Jewish populations. Though my larger project will analyze food in several crucial areas, including within the private home and in charitable and organizational events, this paper will be focused on ethnic entrepreneurship in food-related businesses, including grocery stores, bakeries, restaurants, delicatessens, butcher shops, and confectionaries. By exploring food in a myriad of ways, I hope to articulate just how crucial food was to the creation of tight-knit Jewish communities in the Midwest.

I am interested in exploring several related questions about Jewish life in the Midwest. First I want to challenge traditional accounts of Jewish communal history by asking how, beyond communal histories that tended to revolve around the synagogue, politics, and fraternal organization experience, were these midwestern Jewish communities forged? How was food, in its various iterations, used to create and affirm personal and collective ethnic identities, provide for those in need, and raise money for other Jews who sought charitable assistance? Additionally, the interplay of food between Jewish and non-Jewish individuals will also be an important point of consideration, given the population demographics of many of the towns and cities that held visible Jewish communities. If foodways were altered to meet changing needs, in what ways were they changed and how did these changes affect these communities?

My arguments are threefold. First, contrary to traditional historiographical accounts of Jewish communal history, food was just as, or often more, salient than the traditional pillars of Jewish communal life, such as the synagogue or fraternal organizations. Often relegated to the periphery of scholarly work, food was critical to creating these Jewish communities. Second, the ways in which Jewish immigrants used food to start small businesses, which in turn allowed Jewish business owners to provide comfortable and familiar foods and dishes to networks of kith and kin, maintain their unique religious and cultural identity, and provide gathering spots for conversation, are crucial to understanding the construction of Jewish communities. Lastly, these communities, without the strong presence of Jewish foodways, would not have been as tightly knit or as successful. The presence of food in various ways was, in a sense, the stitching holding the fabric of community together.