

# Packaging Jewishness: Novelty and Tradition in Kosher Food Packaging

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*...it is fair to say that, through his food, the Frenchman experiences a certain national continuity. By way of a thousand detours, food permits him to insert himself daily into his own past....<sup>1</sup>*

Roland Barthes

Many packaged food companies construct their product identities using mythological tropes as a means to link their products with a particular idea. By linking their product to notions of tradition, the manufacturers of mass-produced foods obfuscate the real and eminently modern conditions that make packaged foods possible. References to tradition help to obscure the paradoxical effect in which the very mass production processes that make a packaged product possible are the same processes responsible for eroding traditional production methods and practices. The commodification of tradition through marketing is a way for makers of packaged foods to endow their products with the kind of artisanal aura that, by definition, is unavailable to objects of mass production. Since any actual link to the premodern past has been disrupted by the effects of modernization, advertisers construct mythical product genealogies as substitutes for real histories.<sup>2</sup> This paper examines the role of nostalgia in the design of package labels. It will focus on a particular phenomenon within a particular category of products. I am interested in the dissemination of cultural values through the mass market, specifically, in the commodification of Jewishness or *yiddishkeit* through the use of mythological devices in kosher packaged foods.

To a certain degree, packaged kosher foods exist as a paradox. It embodies the dichotomies of traditional lifestyles in a modern world. It is the reification of an ancient ritual and, at the same time, an emblem of modern convenience. It is the intersection of the rational and irrational, the practical and impractical, and the esoteric and the banal. One might wonder if it isn't the stark contrast of values expressed in the gesture of packaging and marketing something so symbolic as kosher foods that makes the arena of the label so inviting to nostalgic expressions.

As the above quote of Roland Barthes shows, however, a longing for the past, represented though a dramatization of culinary culture, is not exclusively a product of a Jewish-American worldview. Barthes saw nostalgia as a sign of the modern condi-

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1 Roland Barthes, from "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," reprinted in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, eds., *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 24.

2 Barthes's neo-Marxist analysis described the effect this way: "...the product as bought—that is, experienced—by the consumer is, by no means, the real product; between the former and the latter there is a considerable production of false perceptions and values." from "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption" reprinted in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 2.

tion, and as an essential bourgeois malady. As Svetlana Boym put it in *The Future of Nostalgia*, “nostalgia is not necessarily opposed to modernity... rather it is coeval with modernity itself. Nostalgia and progress are like Jekyll and Hyde: alter egos.”<sup>3</sup> I would like to suggest that it is the combination of the loss of traditional lifestyles and the notable social mobility of Jews since the great migrations of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that have made them especially prone to nostalgic yearnings. Sam Levenson described the effect in his 1980 article on New York’s famous Second Avenue Deli, “The very menu is a remembrance of things past, of a Jewish way of life all but destroyed by upward mobility.”<sup>4</sup> For Jews in America, “Progress didn’t cure nostalgia but exacerbated it.”<sup>5</sup>

This scenario, in which the significance of tradition intensifies as its very existence becomes challenged is allegorized in Sholem Alechem’s *Tevia’s Daughters*. Written at the time of the great Jewish migrations out of Eastern Europe, it expressed the anxieties of a generation confronted with the effects of modernity and the dangers of assimilation. A half-century later, the story would take on new significance as *Fiddler on the Roof* (the Broadway play followed by the film version) when Jews took their place in mainstream America. While, for immigrant Jews at the beginning of the century, *Tevia’s Daughters* represented nostalgia for something lost, *Fiddler on the Roof* represented for late-twentieth century Jews nostalgia for something never possessed.

The appearance of *Fiddler on the Roof* in movie theaters three decades ago attests to the disappearance of connections to life of the *shtetls* of the Old World and the tenements of the New World. For its post-immigrant audience, *Fiddler on the Roof* the film represented not merely a longing for tradition, as the following excerpt shows, but rather a longing for the longing of tradition. “We have a tradition for everything,” Tevia exclaims, “for sleeping, for eating, for working, how to wear our clothes.... You may ask, ‘How did this tradition get started?’ .... I’ll tell you... (pause).... I don’t know. But it’s a tradition, and because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects us to do.”<sup>6</sup> For Tevia, the very essence of Jewish identity is based not simply on the performance of rules governing seemingly banal activities such as eating, but particularly on the awareness of the traditional dimension of those activities. Tevia’s confession of his ignorance as to the origin of the traditions suggests the ahistorical and essentially mythic character of nostalgia. Here, in *Fiddler on the Roof*, the obsession with yearning, with nostalgic musing, becomes an aspect of the late-twentieth century, post-immigrant Jewish character. Tevia’s exaltation of tradition, or rather the sentiment of an audience primed for such a viewpoint, “points to a paradox of institutionalized nostalgia: the stronger the loss, the more it is overcompensated with commemorations; the starker the distance from the past, and the more it is prone to idealizations.”<sup>7</sup>

3 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv.

4 The Sam Levinson Quotation appears on the coffee cups of the Second Avenue Deli, Manhattan.

5 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiv.

6 *Fiddler on the Roof*

7 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 17.



Figure 1  
Some of the mainstream kosher packages  
foods certified by the Orthodox Union (OU).  
Copyright Orthodox Union, New York, NY.

This paper considers the labels of kosher packaged foods as a mode of discourse, and as a platform for the dissemination of “institutionalized nostalgia.” As “commemorations of loss,” the labels of some kosher packaged foods are “prone to idealizations” of the past. It is important to note here that, while all kosher foods refer directly to Judaism, the religion, the marketing for some kosher packaged foods also may represent Jewishness, the culture; that is to say, Judaica. When Judaica is one of its ingredients, the consumption of kosher packaged foods is not merely a physiological act, it is a semiological one as well: the consumption of Jewish signifiers. While the consumption of kosher foods is a code of conduct, the packages of kosher foods and their advertisements are themselves a code, a signal which announces identity through an accumulation of signs. Traditional customs, beliefs, values, language, and even memories comprised the field of usable material for the marketing of some kosher products.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, kosher food companies repeatedly sold the notion of tradition along with the foods they produced. The Joseph Jacobs advertising agency, a New York agency specializing in the “Jewish field,” used this strategy so frequently that the commodification of tradition became a traditional means of selling products to their clients’ Jewish clientele.<sup>8</sup> The mainstream-but-kosher companies represented by Joseph Jacobs infused their kosher products’ identities with *yiddishkeit* by advertising with Jewish themes in Jewish publications or on Jewish television programs, particularly in the New York City area. These companies restricted Judeo-centric imagery from the package labels of their products, reserving it for the copy in the advertisements in the Jewish press.

What is important in this kind of advertising is the presence of the word “tradition,” which alone was powerful enough to resonate with Jewish consumers. Domino Sugar, for example, promised the kosher observer a sweeter *seder* “with Domino ... the traditional Passover sugar.” Maxwell House Coffee sold itself as “The taste of TRADITION,” and Tetley Tea ads exhorted the kosher consumer to “treat” their “family and guests to the traditional tea for Rosh Hashanah.” Breakstone’s “Temptee” seduced the kosher shopper

8 The term “Jewish field” is quoted from a Joseph Jacobs promotional publication, *The Jewish Culture*, and what it means to the American manufacturer of his products. (New York: Joseph Jacobs, 1941).



Figure 2  
The Orthodox Union's 'hechscher.' Copyright Orthodox Union, New York, NY. Reproduced by permission. (tm)



Figure 3  
Jar lid for Mother's products.

with the hedonist view that "Life is full of delicious tradition," imploring her to use their cream cheese to "spread one (a delicious tradition) around!"

Although the manufacturers of mainstream kosher products restrict references to yiddishkeit to the confines of the Jewish press, smaller "enclave" kosher companies could afford to extend their marketing tactics beyond mere advertising to the arena of the package itself. In terms of package design, mainstream kosher companies relied solely on the *hechscher* of certifying agencies such as the Orthodox Union to target Jewish consumers.<sup>9</sup> In a sense, because of a self-imposed moratorium on using ethnically charged imagery, mainstream companies are obliged to "pass over" associations that are too Jewish. As opposed to the ethnically cleansed labels of mainstream kosher products, enclave kosher package labels employ a spectrum of imagery which dramatizes "a particular definition of Judaism" through the use of "ethnic hyperbole" comprising a phantasmagoria of stereotypes representing Jews, particularly Jews in relation to food.<sup>10</sup>

Where Jewish food is concerned, a mother is not far away. In the 1937 Yiddish novel *The Mother*, Sholem Ash is simultaneously filled with joy and sorrow as he laments over the memory of his mother's "most wonderful strudel." "I'll never have that again," Ash writes, "I wrote a poem about that."<sup>11</sup> In this characterization, mothers are what memories are made of. As the stuff of memory, the mother becomes elevated to the status of demigoddess, an ideal to whom no mortal can ever compare. Inspired by a divine muse, the culinary production of the mother becomes a paragon by which every morsel is measured and never equaled. Package labels employing the mother theme serve to conjure an image of motherliness as an abstract concept. Rather than representing a specific person in history, the images represent, through general types, an ahistorical persona. The idea of the mother being conveyed is a timeless, mythical construct; a kind of *ur-mutter* which, at the same time, is everyone's mother and yet nobody.

In conjunction with the imprimatur of certifying agencies such as the Orthodox Union, the mother theme found on the labels of kosher packaged food forms a multilayered *hechscher* or seal of approval implying an additional, if mythical, underwriting authority. Rather than depicting a mother on the labels of their products, Mother's brand suggests "her" presence through their slogan: "FROM THE SPOTLESS KITCHENS OF MOTHER'S." By associating itself with motherliness, "Mother's" suggests that their products are accountable to maternal vigilance. The slogan metonymically transfers the irreproachable qualities of motherly integrity and the sanctity of her kosher kitchen to the site of the processing plant. Rather than being synthesized through modern processes in a laboratory environment, the food in the Mother's package is conceptualized as handmade in the *haimisch* or homey setting of "Mother's kitchen,"

9 Defined as the symbol printed on the label of kosher foods that certifies its approval for having met kosher guidelines. The Orthodox Union is the largest of the many kosher certifying agencies. The products under their supervision can be recognized by their symbol: a capital "U" inscribed within a capital "O." From the Joseph Jacobs Co. archive.

10 Jack Kugelmass, "Green Bagels: An Essay on Food Nostalgia and the Carnavalesque," *Yivo Annual* 19 (1990): 69.

11 Sholem Ash, *The Mother* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1937), 140.



Figure 4  
Mrs. Adler's Apple Juice



Figure 5  
Mrs. Adler, the "baleboosteh."

where you might be told "You could eat off the floor it's so clean." The product promises what was, for Sholem Ash, merely an ideal: not only are Mother's kosher foods "like mother used to make," they are the foods that mother made.

Interestingly, there is no attempt to represent the mother of Mother's on the labels of their products. Instead, the mother is left as an abstraction, as if her representation were to constitute a violation of the second commandment. She is a concept of the mind's eye, "imaginable" and yet (un)image(able) beyond the graven image.

With products from Mrs. Adler's line of kosher foods, the consumer is given a representation of a particular mother-type. Although there is no indication as to whether the woman on the label is indeed a mother, the connotation is abundantly clear. Mrs. Adler is represented as a kind of *baleboosteh* or meticulous manager of the house. She is depicted as a conservative woman, a vestige of traditional values. Mrs. Adler's well-groomed appearance from her string of pearls, to her discrete ear rings, to her 1950s vintage glasses and her tightly done hairdo gives the impression that she is strict and overbearing, even *yekkish* (rigid, annoyingly perfectionist). As a *baleboosteh*, Mrs. Adler is a woman for whom "cleanliness was not second to godliness; it was second to nothing."<sup>12</sup>

The domestic division of labor of postwar suburban Jewish life allocated the mother greater power in the family since the father was busy at work. While the father was away "putting food on the table," the mother was at home, literally putting food on the table. This is part of the stereotypical image of the Jewish mother of the postwar era. Jewish comedians from the period routinely turned to the pathology of the smothering mother as a source for tragicomic material, and as a rationale for their often neurotic behavior. As is illustrated in the following skit by Jack Carter, food becomes the quintessential medium through which Jewish mothers instill guilt in an attempt to repair the severed umbilical cord that keeps their sons emotionally tethered. Carter describes a scene at the breakfast table of a Jewish home, where the kids are eating their morning cereal while "the mother is filling up a bag with sandwiches, and pears and apples, and pies and cheese."

She puts it under your arm and when you get to the bus she yells, "Don't forget to come home for lunch." Isn't it true whenever you go to your mother's, she has food ready? It's murder. You can never catch her short. She has eighty courses ready, and she's always running up on her feet, and then they stand behind you like an umpire. "How's the chicken liver?" "Fine." "It needs salt, pepper; you don't like it?" "No, I like it; I like it." "Don't eat too much, there's soup coming."<sup>13</sup>

12 Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), 30.

13 Jack Carter quoted in Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble Between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 147. A compilation of Jewish jokes by Hershel Shanks provides one joke which aptly characterizes an example of "food-abuse" and its psychological ramifications. "A Jewish man goes to see a psychiatrist and says: 'Everyone reminds me of my mother. My wife, the newscaster, even your secretary reminds me of my mother. I'm obsessed. I go to sleep and I dream about my mother. I wake up, can't get back to



Figure 6  
Bubbies Sauerkraut.



Figure 7  
Bubbie, the "yiddische mama."

The mystical aura surrounding matriarchal symbolism in modern Jewish folklore perhaps is best depicted in the label for "Bubbies" kosher sauerkraut ("Bubbie" is a Yiddish endearment for grandmother). The pictorial devices used here identify her as a representation of an earlier notion of Jewish motherliness, the *yiddische mama*. The *yiddische mama* is a figure particularly associated with Jewish women from turn of the century immigration; she is a relic of the old country. Here the tandem association of the mother plus photography equals memory. The trope of nineteenth-century photographic effects helps to suggest a temporal location that is generations old. The label for Bubbies takes the pictorial conventions of the *yiddische mama* to the realm of camp. Nothing could be farther from the aniconic discretion of the label design for Mothers than Bubbies baroque profusion of old-fashioned signifiers. As if one could miss the thrust of the nonverbal suggestions, the makers of Bubbies spell it out for the shopper. "'Traditional' raw cabbage, uncooked" is printed not only on one but both sides of the Bubbies portrait. A flourishing cartouche frames the central portrait, and "Traditional" is printed in italicized script. Even the storage information is patterned after the ungainly prolixity of nineteenth-century patent medicine labels: "Refrigerate until the last portion is enjoyed."

With their careful consideration of all aspects of the package label including trivial details in the copy, Bubbies is intent on selling tradition as much as they sell food. However, it is the portrait of Bubbie on the label that is the most effective tool for transforming sauerkraut from a common, gray vegetable product to a transmitter of the abstract idea of tradition. The nineteenth-century cameo motif is used to suggest images from Victorian era photo albums. The oval frame allows her body type to be made more clearly evident. She is a stocky woman whose corpulence belies her passion for her trade having tasted all of her delicacies several times before they reached the table.

Like Mrs. Adler, the Bubbie's hair is neatly combed to the side. Her stern expression helps us to identify the period, and is likely the result of both the slow shutter speed of early photography as well as the strict codes of conduct of the Victorian era. All of the cues tell us that Bubbie is an immigrant; her identity as a *yiddische mama* is unquestionable. The picture of the Bubbie reminds the shopper of a bygone era, a simpler time before the simplification of domestic labor, a time when everybody's mother prepared her own meals from scratch. This is the miraculous Jewish "obermother" from immigrant Sarah Rilke's memory who could, as she claims, "milk her pots as though they were cows. They never denied her anything," Rilke insists. "She gave them cold water, and the pots yielded yesterday's carrot soup anew .... When the pots heard mother sigh, it was as though she had repeated a secret incantation over them with which she adjured them to supply the pitiful meager bit of nourishment which was all she demanded for her large brood."<sup>14</sup>

sleep, and I have to go downstairs and have a glass of tea and a piece of toast.' The psychiatrist says, 'What? Just one piece of toast for a big boy like you?'" Hershel Shanks, *101 Best Jewish Jokes* (Washington, DC: Moment Press, 1999), 15. Another excellent and hilarious (though politically incorrect) portrait of can be found in Dan Greenburg's book, *How to Be a Jewish Mother: A Very Loving Training Manual* (Price Stern Sloan Publishers, 1965).

14 Sidney Stahl Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers: The Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 162.

Like the label glued to the sauerkraut jar, such nostalgic meanings stick to the product; the product takes on the valences associated with “bubbiness.” This process of association is described by Robert Goldman, author of the materialist critique, *Reading Ads Socially*, as “Abstracting and separating photographic records of unspecific actors and actions from their lived, organic context, these photographs become signifiers in search of a signified.”<sup>15</sup> The bubbie photograph functions as inspiration for the consumer’s imagination, to aid in fabricating a pseudo-historical lineage between traditional methods of production and modern habits of consumption. The label of Bubbies “manufactures an artificial tradition of historical meaning” by appealing to the consumer’s sentiment with a romanticized characterization of the bubbie’s imagined immigrant life.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of the hardships they encountered, or perhaps because of them, the immigrants who came through ports including Ellis Island a century ago often are perceived as possessing a character of a higher standard. The products of their labor, the residue of human striving under adverse conditions, bear an aura of authenticity. By associating their product with the products of immigrant labor, the makers of Bubbies graft a notion of authenticity to a mass-produced packaged food. Contrary to the tacit claims intimated by the label, Bubbies sauerkraut is not produced in small batches in your grandmother’s kitchen, but rather on an assembly line. With the nostalgic references on the label for Bubbies, the facts of material production are not merely glossed over but subverted.

In addition to “commodifying tradition” through a carefully crafted marketing scheme, Bubbies sauerkraut effectively sanctions the kosher ritual itself by linking positive images of tradition with a kosher food. Like advertisements that, according to Robert Goldman, “offer to sell us back idealized images of ourselves as we would like to be (or think we ought to be),” the label for Bubbies markets a particular definition of Jewishness, one which values a notion of tradition as a tradition itself.<sup>17</sup> The celebration of tradition for tradition’s sake by practicing *kashruth* (*the system of the kosher diet*) through the purchase of kosher packaged foods becomes not only a meaningful way to observe, but also to celebrate Jewish identity. In contrast to the time when the rejection of kosher ritual was rationalized because it was traditional, products such as Bubbies sauerkraut allow the consumer to rationalize kosher as an appropriate expression of one’s Jewish identity for the same reason, because it is traditional. It matters not whether the portrait representing the bubbie on the label for Bubbies sauerkraut is an actual likeness of the originator of the product. What does matter is that the imagery is coordinated with the other rhetorical tropes to suggest “traditionalism.”<sup>18</sup>

In order to convey a sense of tradition, the Manischewitz Company recently updated their package labels, replacing the old modernist design with a new folkish sentimentality. Like the other mother products mentioned above, the new line of Mrs.

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15 Robert Goldman, *Reading Ads Socially* (London: Routledge, 1992), 92.

16 *Ibid.*, 92.

17 *Ibid.*, 102.

18 The portrait is in fact the grandmother of the company’s owner.



Figure 8  
Mrs. Manischewitz Latke Mix.



Figure 9 (above)  
Mrs. Manischewitz, the "liberated housewife."

Figure 10 (right)  
Top: Text bubble on the front of the package.  
Bottom: List of ingredients on the side of the package.

Manischewitz packaged foods feature a portrait of the company's matriarch Mrs. Manischewitz is portrayed with all the gentility of a modern Protestant-American woman including lipstick and earrings, and a hairdo that would not look out of place on the head of a First Lady, say Betty Ford or Pat Nixon. Unlike the dour stoicism on the face of the sauerkraut bubbie, Mrs. Manischewitz eagerly beams at the would-be shopper, her painted lips parting to reveal her perfect dentition. This is not a woman who appears enslaved by the hardships of daily meal preparation because she *has to cook* like her grandmother. Rather Mrs. Manischewitz is a liberated woman who's modern lifestyle affords her the luxury of smiling because she wants to cook like her grandmother, even if that means opening a package once or twice a year. But in spite of the modern appearance of Mrs. Manischewitz, the label is replete with sentimentalized references to tradition.

Besides using the word "homestyle" to intimate a folkish sensibility, the label includes a text bubble emanating from the cameo of Mrs. Manischewitz with the words "My Bubbie's recipe!" Despite the fact that the real recipe for the latke mix includes ingredients such as diglycerides, sodium bisulfate, and partially hydrogenated cottonseed oil, Mrs. Manischewitz's reference to her bubbie serves to highlight the suggested "premodern" authenticity of the recipe by attributing it to her grandmother. Moreover, like peeling an onion, the true attribution of the recipe can never really be possible because, as the statement "My Bubbie's recipe!" implies, another matriarchal layer can always be uncovered, that is, her bubbie's recipe is, in fact, the recipe of her bubbie and her bubbie's bubbie. The recipe therefore is generations old. The timelessness of the text endows the recipe with a quasi-sacerdotal aura. The reenactment of the recipe, the preparation of the latke mix, thus becomes akin to religious ritual, its performance validates the consumer as a member of the chosen people.

Mrs. Manischewitz exists before us on the box of Homestyle





Figure 11  
HE'BREW Beer.



Latke mix as the conduit through which tradition flows. The reverse side features a letter written by Mrs. Manischewitz to her deceased grandmother. The style of the letter (even the letter format itself serves as an index to the past), the use of incomplete sentences in a sort of stream of consciousness, the shifting tense, and subject matter suggests the reverie of memory recall. A diffused black and white drawing emerges from the background of the letter, and provides the visual component of the memory. "Dear Bubbie," the letter starts,

Nobody loved me quite like you.... The holidays, I can still smell the latkes. Zadie smiled every time we came to visit. The Stone Avenue Talmud Torah on Rosh Hashanah. Moishe Oysher. What a voice. Wonderful memories. Precious. I can still smell the latkes. Your great-grandson Eric is 21. A man. Graduating from Brown. Who would have believed ... from a shtetl to the Ivy League. You would be so proud. I can still smell the latkes. Crisp and hot. Sour cream or applesauce. It didn't matter. Bubbie. I love you. I miss you so much.

Mrs. Manischewitz's sentimentalized latke soliloquy to her dead grandmother underwrites her authority as the genuine transmitter of tradition with her pathos serving as her credentials. Through the medium of food, the package, like a genealogical record, traces the matriculation of Jews in America from their origins as disadvantaged immigrants to their status as successful (and nostalgic) mainstream Americans.

In the Manischewitz package, Jewish participation in activities once associated with gentiles serves as an indicator of assimilation and social mobility. Here, the attainment of mainstream social status is defined by the latest generation's acceptance to the Ivy League, once known as an institution of cultural elitism and exclusion. Yet, the successful integration of Jews is matched by a sense of yearning for the past. Mrs. Manischewitz's euphoric praise of her son's achievements is commingled with melancholia and a sense of loss. Despite changes over time, or rather because of them, the need to recall the past becomes ever more important, and packaged food offers itself as a tool for that purpose.

The celebration of Jewish achievements in terms of social acceptance and material wealth is symbolized by the new possibilities afforded by "He'Brew" Beer, namely, the initiation of Jews into beer culture. Gone are the days when it was commonly assumed that "Jews eat to celebrate, non-Jews drink."<sup>19</sup> With He'Brew, the celebration of "celebrating by drinking" begins as the final phase of assimilation draws to a close. But in order to cast beer drinking as a Jewish activity, the makers of He'Brew created a label filled with references to tradition.

19 Jack Kuggelmass, "Green Bagels: An Essay on Food Nostalgia and the Carnavalesque" 66 and 73.

Figure 12

Label for traditional wine.



Using quasi-Chagallian pictorial conventions, the image on the front of He'Brew features a "rhino-centric" caricature of a Jewish immigrant (nasally well-endowed and myopic) rising above a fabled skyline, part San Francisco, part old Jerusalem, and part European shtetl. The streets are decorated with the domed and star-bedecked tops of synagogues. Caricaturing the triumphant arrival of the chosen people to the Promised Land, He'Brew transposes the ironic image of the poor, bearded, and disheveled immigrant upon entry to Ellis Island to modern-day California. Here, the Promised Land is conceptualized as both a place (Northern California) and an idea (mainstream, middle-class America).

He'Brew employs Hebraic-style script to connote tradition and to signal Jewish ethnicity. The typographical punning used here resembles the label for Traditional wine in the 1950s, in which tradition not only is suggested through the name of the product but by the style of its script.<sup>20</sup> But even if the actual meaning of the word has no particular link to tradition, the use of such a font can yoke together disparate meanings "ethno-typographically" to suggest *yiddishkeit*.

But He'Brew's use of parody goes well beyond the punning use of Moses condensed in its brand name. In the He'Brew label, no opportunity is missed, no space is wasted on purely practical information. From the slogan at the top to the storage information

20 I would like to thank Mr. Peter Schweitzer of New York for making his kosher wine labels available to me.

at the bottom, the microbrew's label is an open microphone from which the makers of He'Brew do their standup comedy routine. With He'Brew beer, the kosher ritual becomes incorporated into a kind of ritualistic Jewish satire. As a sort of ethnic self-awareness that takes the form of parody, He'Brew expresses what I'd call a "Jew-ish" sensibility.<sup>21</sup> It's not important that a company simply incorporates stereotypes as part of its own identity, but rather that its identity is based on the transformation of stereotypes into playful self-mockery. He'Brew's jesting dramatizes a particular definition of what it means to be American and Jewish, and parodic rhetoric is part of that definition.

The product description on the label of He'Brew begins with a lampoon on the first of the four questions in the Haggada service for Passover, marketing the Jewish ritual as an American ritual of consumption. "Why is this beer different from all other beers?" asks the Genesis Ale Company. The answer, of all places, is at the "Beginning":

In the beginning, there was an idea, and it was good: A microbrew to compliment the Jewish-American experience. Whether at the Shabbat table or at the deli counter, He'Brew can accompany the sacred rites and rituals of life or simply inspire moments of joy and delight.

By allowing observant Jews to imbibe in the latest American trends such as the microbrew phenomenon, He'Brew does indeed compliment the Jewish-American experience. The Jewish-American experience as the "Genesis Ale" Company, acknowledged on the label, encompasses a broad spectrum of "sacred rites" ranging from the holy observance of kashruth to the wholly unobservant ritual of the kosher-style deli.

In the long-winded product description printed on the side of the label, He'Brew makes explicit reference to the issue of Jewish mobility in America, particularly to a "post-New York" Jewish experience:

Our first creation is Genesis Ale. Barley is one of seven Biblical species that celebrate the bounty of the Land of Milk and Honey (Deut. 8.8), and He'Brew draws a symbolic link to our own Garden of Eden in Northern California. A smidgen of Middle East, a dash of American West.

By recalling the classic Diaspora narrative, He'Brew beer conflates the history of Jewish mobility into one grand epic, leading from biblical exodus to its most recent manifestation as urban flight to the Garden of Eden, Northern California. In the never-ending saga of Diaspora, He'Brew replaces the former modern Garden of Eden, New York City, with its postmodern version, California. He'Brew beer allegorizes the social transformation and geographic translocation of the Jews as a migratory and foreign people at the beginning of

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21 Drawing upon English playwright Johnathan Miller's famous retort when asked about his ethnicity. He replied, "In fact, I'm not really a Jew. Just Jew-ish."



Figure 13  
Delancey Dessert Co. Rugelach.

the last century in the Ghettos of the Lower East Side, to the Jews as upwardly mobile, thoroughly American, and geographically diverse at the century's end.

By removing themselves from the social fabric of New York, ex-New Yorkers provided themselves with the kind of distance necessary for a nostalgic appreciation, as well as a parody of their cultural heritage. As Jack Kuggelmass described the experience of the patrons of Sammy's Romanian Steak House in New York's Lower East Side, "It was only through a break in the physical and social connection to the Lower East Side that there could have emerged a nostalgic tie to the area."<sup>22</sup>

The characteristic of "Lowereastsidedness" is used to connote authenticity in the textual rationale for the *rugelach* made by the Delancey Dessert Company. "These rugelach, baked daily on the Lower East Side, are among the last remaining remnants of the vibrant Jewish culture.... Rolled into their many folds and lodged between the crispy, flaky dough is the rich taste of tradition...." Again, the Lower East Side takes on legendary significance. In this conceptualization, the rugelach contain the essence of the Lower East Side. The Lower East Side is more than just a place where they are made; it is an ingredient from which they are made. In between the rhetorical folds and flakes on the package, food and tradition are conflated; rugelach become transcendent, and tradition is concretized and consumable. In a kind of metonymic transformation, the rugelach do more than symbolize the Lower East Side. These rugelach are samples of the Lower East Side. Torn from their place of origin, they function as souvenirs which, in their "many folds," envelop the present within the past.

But in the nostalgic construct envisioned by the Delancey Dessert Company, the Lower East Side exists only "as narrative."<sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> The Lower East Side, as it was known in its heyday, is exhumed through the act of telling. It is "an imaginary and indefinitely remote place," a real utopia.<sup>25</sup> In a kind of rhetorical slight-of-hand, the past and present are allowed to coexist on a package of rugelach. How else could these rugelach be a "remnant" of a culture that is "vibrant"? The appeal of a non-place such as the Lower East side is derived from its passing away. Just as utopias continue to hold promises as long as they remain unachievable, "The place of origin must remain unavailable in order for desire to be generated."<sup>26</sup> In exchange for its actual but ephemeral existence, the Lower East Side is reconstructed as narrative for eternity.

Despite the simple homey or *Hamish* quality invested in the Delancey package, the product actually is marketed to higher income shoppers at specialty markets. Through the product description on the back of the package, the contents themselves morph into containers of meaning representing a set of qualities, values, and ideas "in order to signify materially a pattern of immaterial realities."<sup>27</sup> The package membrane here serves not merely as a shell to protect

22 Jack Kuggelmass, "Green Bagels: An Essay on Food Nostalgia and the Carnavalesque": 73.

23 Susan Stuart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1984), 151.

24 Interestingly, the Delancey Desert Company is neither located on Delancey Street nor is it, strictly speaking, a bakery. Rather, it acts as a distribution center operating out of the basement of a highrise apartment building, where outsourced baked goods are packaged and shipped.

25 *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1995), 1302.

26 Susan Stuart, *On Longing*, 151.

27 Roland Barthes from "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," 24.

its contents, but as a skin which changes its color allowing these humble Yiddish pastries a veritable plethora of polysemic possibilities. The language on the package transforms rugelach from food to conundrum. "What are rugelach?" (The very question tells us that they are more than pastry.) "Rugelach are: old world, revolutionary, creamy, flaky, down to earth, very Hester Street, very Columbus Avenue, Hamish, haute ...." For consumers with disposable income, the quaintness of lower-class tenement culture has exchange value for the promotion of "haute" cuisine.<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes identified a similar effect in advertising for French food, where notions of high and low culture become synthesized under the rubric of the product. "The historical theme," says Barthes, "which so often was sounded in our advertising, mobilizes two different values: on the one hand, it implies an aristocratic tradition ... on the other hand, food frequently carries notions of representing the flavorful survival of an old, rural society that is itself highly idealized."<sup>29</sup>

The romanticized vision of the Lower East Side described in the label text is reinforced by the photographic imagery on the front of the package. An elderly man and woman hold trays of what appear to be the deserts they just baked. The costume of the subjects, as well as the pictorial conventions, "age" the photo and authenticate the product within. The sartorial past tense of these figures makes them fossils from a bygone era.<sup>30</sup> The woman wears a simple dress, the man a white shirt and a white paper hat like the kind worn by "soda jerks" in depression-era candy stores. Despite the fact that this photo is not antique but contemporary, photographs such as this "turn the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions, and disarming historical judgments by the generalized pathos of looking at times past."<sup>31</sup> Here, the hard and unforgiving edges of history, including the suffering tenement conditions which were a hallmark of life on the Lower East Side, become chamfered into the rounded, supple corners of myth. The photo's soft gradient edges represent the process of "looking at time past" not with the eye, but with the mind's eye. In the mode of vision presented by the Delancey Dessert Company, reflection on the past (in this case, the pseudo-past) is akin to dreaming. Like the monochrome photograph, the vague and indistinct aspects of dream and memory become black and white.

Although the attitudes expressed in the Delancey package and the label for He'Brew beer are rather different, both spring from the same social phenomenon. From East European shtetl to New York City tenement to suburban subdivision, Jews migrated geographically, but they also migrated socially. The movement toward mainstream American values, such as the convenience of packaged food, was also movement away from life of "simpler times." Nostalgia in the form of package food labels offers the consumer a chance to "insert himself" as Barthes might say, "into his own past." What matters though is not whether the package convinces the consumer

28 In "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," Barthes notes the popularity of featuring "peasant stew" in the photographic pages of the major ladies' magazines. See, *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 27.

29 Roland Barthes, "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," 27.

30 "Fossils" in a figurative sense, of course, especially since the woman in the photo still is alive according to Zvi Lavi, the owner of Delancey Desert Co.

31 Roland Barthes, "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," 24.

that this or that product is authentic. Rather, it is the prevalence of such packaging which serves as a diagnosis for a social phenomenon. After all, is it not the desire to return to one's past which indicates that one has somehow been dispossessed of it?