

The bagel.

Tonight I want to talk to you about the bagel.

I'm confident that at least one person here is now thinking that you're grateful I chose a sermon about bread products for Rosh Hashanah and not Yom Kippur.

The bagel has a significant history, dating back to at least the 1600s.

While there are clear similarities to other round breads in other areas of the world

As round shapes are associated with good fortune in many cultures,

the beginnings of the relationship between Jews and round bread begins in Poland.

In records of the Polish Jewish community in 1610, there is a reference to the "beigel,"

which was apparently deemed the appropriate gift for pregnant women and midwives.¹

By the early 1800s, records tell us every peddler's cart on every Polish street corner had bagels for sale.

The bagel became a Jewish contribution to Polish life, eaten by rich and poor, Jews and Christians; the bagel was loved across boundaries that divided people into separate sectors of society.

The bagel was one of the few things that made Jews feel a part of the community at large.

The Polish bagel was a ring-shaped bread that was wider than what is common in modern America; the bagel was a larger, thinner ring with a more pronounced hole.

The larger hole allowed for easier carrying by hand as well as more efficient storage by stacking bagels on the poles of peddler carts.

¹ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 35.

The texture of this bread was chewy on the inside with a hard crust on the outside created by the boiling process.

The Polish bagel is often compared to a soft pretzel, in texture, color and eating practice; just like today we might be out at an event and buy a decadent, large soft pretzel, undoubtedly burning our fingers as we dig in with impatience and dip the dough into mustard or beer cheese, the bagel was either eaten plain or dipped in schmaltz or butter.

As Eastern European immigrants began to come to America in mass, they brought their beloved bagel with them

And by 1907 there were three hundred bagel bakers in New York City.

In the early waves of Eastern European Jewish immigrations, bagels were a guaranteed cheap way to fill your stomach.²

The bagel industry became a force on the Lower East Side of Manhattan with the establishment of unions like the Bagel Bakers Local 338, and a culture of excellence in bagel making with guarded recipes and techniques.

Eventually, as these immigrants gained both status and economic stability in America, the bagel was not a part of their daily diet and became more of an occasion-centric eat and often, a special treat on Sunday mornings.³

² Balinska, *The Bagel*, 99.

³ Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 36.

As in Poland, bagels became a part of the culture, a Jewish contribution.

However, this was not the same bagel that had been sold from peddler carts on European street corners.

In America, the bagel went through an evolution and while it still held to its round shape and chewy texture, much of the rest of what made a bagel a bagel changed.

Where the Polish bagel had been dark in color, the American bagel became progressively lighter, approaching white. As these immigrant Jews sought to become a part of mainstream culture, they found themselves needing to cross societal, categorical boundaries.

At this time in American culture, one was either white or black, there was less nuance in the conversation of race and identity.

The experience of Eastern European Jews had thus far been as the perennial “other” desperately wanting to be a part of the majority, of the mainstream

And therefore, Jews sought to be seen as “white.”

Jews wanted to be white and what did white people eat?

White people ate white bread.

As Professor Aaron Bobrow-Strain writes, “white bread has long stood as a symbol of wealth and status – and in America, racial purity... to eat white bread was to participate in the process of building a better nation.”⁴

⁴ Bobrow-Strain, *White Bread: A Social History of the Store-Bought Loaf*, 64.

This fear of yet again being labeled an outsider drove much of Jewish culture and society in this time period,

including the intense opposition to a Zionist state that was steadfast in our own Reform movement through the early 1900s.

Food was not immune to this influence of fear and therefore, the bagel began to change to reflect this deep desire to be white Americans.

The bagel changed in color, but also in structure. Though it remained round and in an unending loop, its hole shrunk significantly.

Whereas the European bagel had been dipped into a topping, a smaller hole allowed for the more civilized and fancier presentation of a topping on the bagel itself.

A small hole allowed for the bagel to be dressed without anything clumsily falling through.

With this change, the bagel literally became a vehicle for wealth.

As Jewish immigrant families began to gain some economic stability and the second generation found themselves in higher standing, they could afford a higher level of luxury⁵ which they did not hide.

Think about butchery culture. You walk into the butcher or other markets and what do you do? You yell out your order, loud enough so that everyone can hear and therefore, everyone knows what you can afford to eat.

Lox and cream cheese, what became the quintessential bagel dressing, reflected wealth.; layering your white bread with dairy and fish was a statement.

⁵ Marx, "Eating Up: The Origins of Bagels and Lox", 90.

Dairy was not a staple of Eastern European life as it was not only expensive but required consistent access to refrigeration.

Salmon was also expensive and could be difficult to acquire in America at this time so while the cheaper, more accessible whitefish was more widely consumed, lox was a delicacy typically purchased in small quantities⁶ and only by those who had truly made something of themselves in their new American life.

While shmearing cream cheese and layering lox on a bagel was a status symbol, emblematic of Jewish economic success in America after so many years of European poverty, it also reflected a Jewish, kosher adaptation of the American Sunday brunch staple, Eggs Benedict.

With the bagel as an English muffin, the cream cheese mirroring the hollandaise sauce and the lox taking the place of sliced ham,

Can we even say “ham” on the bimah?

the bagel and its accoutrements became a Jewish attempt to be a part of American food culture.

This was a unique opportunity for Jews to truly have it all, to move up the ladder of society, to be part of the larger culture, while still keeping within the boundaries of kashrut. As in the markets of Poland, in America the bagel yet again became an opportunity for Jews to find their place.

⁶ Ibid, 87.

The bagel.

I'm sure many of us will be elbow deep in bagels in just a week and a half as we break our fast after Yom Kippur.

And I was warned shortly after my arrival to Denver, if you want to order Rosenbergs for break fast, you need some serious advanced planning.

So we'll eat them next week and certainly, bagels are without a doubt delicious,

But why in the world,

on my first opportunity to address our whole congregation on the High Holy Days am I going on and on about bagels?

I'm sure that many of you are sitting there asking yourself this question, or maybe whispering to your neighbor about it in a hushed voice.

Bagels are clearly a symbol of today's American Jewish life.

But the story of the bagel also represents an opportunity for us to see a clear evolution, an active process of identity formation and societal change.

Walking the winding path of the story of the bagel can prompt us to think about where we as a community stand today, where we've been and where we may be going.

Why are you here tonight?

I'm sure many of us may say "I'm here because I'm supposed to be here. Its rosh Hashanah!"

Ok, but why?

You're here because you always come
or you feel you're supposed to
but where does that come from?

Are you here marking Rosh Hashanah at Sinai this year because you're moved by the music?

Because the words of Avinu Malkeinu stir your soul?

Are you here hoping your rabbi will say something of value? (She is hopefully getting there...)

Are you sitting in this sanctuary for Rosh Hashanah because it connects you to your heritage, your ancestry, your family?

I know that every time I hear the familiar words and melodies of the high holy days, I am transported to Westwood, Massachusetts, a little girl sitting between my parents, twirling the strands of my dad's talit and smiling up at my mom as she sang along with her whole heart.

Why have you chosen, whether you realized it or not, to be a part of Jewish life today? Any day?

It is easy to get buried in habit, in logistics and schedules, in temple dynamics, in what has always been.

But that's not what being Jewish is about.

Being Jewish is about asking WHY.

Why am I here, why am I doing this.

It is about engaging in a journey, about pushing and challenging ourselves, our minds.

The bagel changed over time, responding to its world, responding to Jewish needs and evolving times. How will we change? How will we respond?

The bagel moved from a practical form of caloric intake to an artisanal product with flavors and toppings and advanced techniques. It doesn't mean that the original bagels are defunct or without merit, they live on in history and on certain street corners in today's Jerusalem.

The same way that we've evolved from the Union Prayerbook to our service as it stands today and the same way that we'll continue to evolve.

In our Shabbat prayerbook, we have a beautiful quote from Rabbi Rami Shapiro. It is included in the Shabbat morning version of the Amidah prayers when we acknowledge God as the God of our ancestors who has cared for us for generations and generations. Rabbi Rami writes,

“we are shaped by those who came before us. As an acorn is formed by the tree that preceded it, yet gives rise to a tree uniquely its own, so we are formed by our ancestors, yet give rise to a Judaism uniquely our own.”

How are our trees, our Judaism uniquely our own?

What are the ways we can hold on to our tradition, hold on to who we are,

But also grow and adapt and respond to what is happening in our world?

As the bagel evolved and changed over time, so have we and so will we continue to do. We need to make active choices about how we express ourselves as Jews living in 5780. We need to look at the areas of our Jewish lives that have gone untouched, unexplored, uninspired.

As I begin my first full Jewish year as your rabbi, I want to be a part of this process with you.

I want to talk about your Jewish life

What is fulfilling, what is missing

I want to have a conversation about our community, about the future of Temple Sinai.

Often, I'll mark a sermon as successful when I hear a lot of feedback at the oneg, when you come to me with your thoughts and reactions.

This sermon, I'll mark this sermon as successful if after the High Holy Days, my email inbox is full.

Write, call, visit- let me know how we can walk this Jewish journey and evolution together.

Lets talk.

Come sit in my office,

lets grab a cup of coffee

maybe get a bagel.

On June 1st, I was ordained A rabbi, but standing here on September 29th alongside Rabbi Rheins, I am serving as YOUR rabbi.

I am honored and humbled and prepared for the journey.

Shana tova, lets move forward together.