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Balancing Act: Identity and Otherness among Latin American Immigrants and their Food Practices

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Abstract

This article deals with the identity construction of Latin American immigrants in Israel through their food practices. Food is a basic symbolic element connecting cultural perceptions and experiences. For immigrants, food is also an important element in the maintenance of personal ties with their home countries and a cohesive factor in the construction of a new identity in Israel, their adopted homeland. Food practices encode tacit information and non-verbal cues that are integral parts of an individual's relationship with different social groups. In this case, I recruited participants from an online group formed within social media platforms of Latin American women living in Israel. The basic assumption of this study posits that certain communication systems are set in motion around food events in various social contexts pertaining to different national or local cuisines and culinary customs. Their meaning, significance and modifications and how they are framed. This article focuses on the adaptation and acculturation processes because it is at that point that immigrants are faced with an interesting duality of reconstructing their unique cultural perceptions to either fit the existing national collective ethos or create a new reality. In this study, the main objective is to compare two different immigrant groups: Jewish and non-Jewish women from Latin America who came to Israel during the last ten years. The comparative nature of the research revealed marked differences between ethnic, religious and cultural elements that reflect coping strategies manifested in the cultural production of food and its representation in two distinct domains: private and public. In the former, it is illustrated within the family and home and how they connect or clash with the latter in the form of consumption in public. Combining cultural studies and discourse analysis, this article offers fresh insight into new models of food practices and reproductions. The article's contribution to new food research lies in its ability to shed light on how inter-generational and inter-religious discourses are melded while food practices and traditions are embedded in a new Israeli identity.

Keywords: food; Israel; Mexico; Jewish; Latin America; religion; culture.

Introduction

Food images are everywhere: on billboards, park benches, newspaper ads and in mass communications. Is food just a means of sustenance or is it something more? Some say food is tied to family history and connected to individual memory. Marketing and branding can change how food is perceived,

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purchased, prepared, and consumed. Under this guise, food can be invented, redesigned, constructed or deconstructed and can even be a source of empowerment (Kearney 2010; Nestle 2006). Turn on the television in most countries and you are instantly bombarded by food commercials ranging from the biggest and most mouth-watering hamburgers to large food conglomerates selling their latest fusion concoctions (Harris, Bargh, and Brownell 2009; Andreyeva and Harris 2011). We are consumed by our food options and choices. However, in Israel this is not the case. Yes, you do get the occasional *hummus* ads sponsored by one of the many popular local brands or maybe a commercial here and there on tasty schnitzels targeted at children. Most Israeli channels do not show any commercials at all, this is because until September 2015, residents had to pay a TV tax, a vestige from the British Mandate, which spared them from the onslaught of advertisements.¹ Even at the movies, in Israel people only get snippets of the major international fast food companies or soft drinks, a true sign of globalization and increasing consumerism.

It's a whole different ballgame when you step into the local supermarkets, high-end health-food stores or kiosks (small corner convenience stores). There, and on social media networks, Latin American food is seen as exotic and spicy. The same exotic label is bestowed upon Asian food. Therefore, it is not surprising to find entire stands dedicated to Mexican food in East-West Asian stores or to find both types of foodstuffs grouped together in the same aisle of high-end boutique food shops (Bar Tzuri 2013; Goldman and Hino 2005; Raz-Chaimovich 2016; Shemesh 2015). Sometimes products are mislabeled due to a lack of knowledge about what is being sold. For example, *habanero* chiles were marked as spicy *poblano* chiles. *Poblano* chiles are known in Mexico for their mild and delicate flavor and are not at all spicy. This snafu is common and also shows a lack of understanding of the importance of the foodstuff.

Mexican food is especially loved in Israel, since it is the most widely recognized and sampled but it was not always the case (Arad 2012). These foodstuffs are marketed as healthy, vegan and gluten-free and usually sold at premium prices. Restaurants also try to dabble in what they refer to as "Latin Street Food." These establishments are a far cry from authentic cuisines and only serve a semblance of these flavors.² Most of these places have no idea what

¹ Since 1965, any Israeli household with a television set (larger than 29 inches)—whether used for cable, satellite or strictly for watching videos—was obligated to pay an annual television tax. This tax, which helped fund the Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA), was levied by the Israel Tax Authority, a subdivision of the Ministry of Finance. In 2015, the tax stood at NIS 345 per year (\$100). For more on this topic, see Aron Dónzis (March 6, 2014), "Israel's TV tax to end in 2015." *Times of Israel*. <http://www.timesofisrael.com/israels-tv-tax-to-end-in-2015/>

² According to Israel's restaurants guide and the leading portal of the food and restaurant sectors in Israel established in 1998, there are 153 categories of restaurants in Israel. Those listed under the rubric of Latin American numbered 167 and included Argentinean, Brazilian, Cuban, Mexican, South American, and *Tortillas* Bars. This online guide has the most up-to-date information on restaurants, bars, cafes and kosher restaurants in Israel. <http://www.restaurants.co.il/home/doc.aspx?mCatID=18898>

Latin American food is all about and participate in a practice I like to call the “add *tortilla* and stir phenomena.” They basically add flour *tortillas* to their repertoire and call it a day.³ For example, a local fast food joint selling *schnitzel* (a typical Israeli dish inspired and adapted from a dish brought by German immigrants which consists of a breaded chicken breast), added *tortillas* and turned it into a “*tortilla bar*” which basically means that the *schnitzel* is wrapped in a cold flour *tortilla*. These “*tortilla bars*” serve anything from *schnitzels* to *shakshuka* (a dish of spicy poached eggs with tomatoes, cooked in a medley of onions, peppers, and spices), along with desserts. Most of these restaurants serve commercially ready-made packaged flour or whole wheat *tortillas* which are now commonly available in many supermarkets. Corn *tortillas* are marketed as healthy because they are naturally low in fat and sodium, and provide calcium, potassium, fiber, iron and B vitamins (Caballero, Finglas and Toldrá 2016: 324).

Another trend is to add the words “picante”, “Mexican” or “spicy” to an item, automatically converting it into Latin food. For example, a brand of organic peanut butter that added the word “Mexican” and a picture of a red chile pepper to its label to indicate that it is spicy, potato chips that added the phrase “Mexican flavor”, or baked pita chips that stamped “Spicy Mexican” on its packages along with a warning to consumers to be careful because they taste like fire. These examples serve as interesting cases of food fusion where a foreign element is mixed with a local one, combining them to create *new* products and in essence a *new* culinary practice that moves away from authentic dishes morphing into a *new* construct. Engelhardt (2011), alludes to the evolution of fake culture and the complex, fragmented, and multiple meanings of food, in reference to southern cooking practices.

Israeli restaurants often participate in cultural production of food in fascinating ways by creating fusion dishes. These dishes exemplify the love affair that Israelis have with the Latin American palate whilst incorporating a unique local flavor. They include such variations as *hummus* and beans, which was featured in a popular pancake house; or a cheese *tortilla* combining cream cheese, *Hemed* (a local Israeli cheese), pesto, roasted peppers wrapped in a crispy *tortilla*; or in another restaurant where a sunny side egg was placed on top of pancakes and was accompanied by an avocado/chile spread and a black bean salad composed of corn, gamba (a local Israeli chile), parsley, garlic and green

³ A flour *tortilla* (or wheat *tortilla*) is a type of soft, thin flatbread made from finely ground wheat flour from Mexico. Originally derived from the finely ground maize (corn) *tortilla*, a flatbread which predates the arrival of Europeans to the Americas, the wheat flour *tortilla* was an innovation by exiled Spanish Jews who did not consider cornmeal to be kosher, using wheat brought from Europe, while this region was the colony of New Spain (Guerra 2006). Corn *tortillas* are smaller in diameter than their flour counterparts. *Tortillas* and their variants, remain a staple food in Latin America. In Guatemala and Mexico, there are three colors of maize *masa* (dough) for making *tortillas*: white, yellow and blue (or black).

onion and sour cream.⁴ To say the least, these erroneous perceptions deeply annoy or bemuse native Latin Americans living in Israel who long for their local delicacies and they can only find poor imitations. Their options are to cook at home, bring items back with them or order from catering businesses run by other Latin Americans - something which was unheard of even a decade ago.

In addition to describing how these images of food are perceived by Israeli and Latin Americans, this article also discusses how Latin American food and its cultural codes have been transplanted to Israel. Specifically, this article discusses the identity construction of Latin American immigrants in Israel through their food practices. Food is a basic symbolic element connecting cultural perceptions and experiences (Bake 2004). It is also an important element in the maintenance of personal ties with their home countries and a cohesive factor in the construction of a new identity in Israel, immigrants' adopted homeland. Food practices encode tacit information and non-verbal cues that are integral parts of an individual's relationship with different social groups. In this case, information was gathered from participants recruited from online groups formed in the social media of Latin American women living in Israel, Mexican women in Israel, Latin Americans in Israel and from various groups of friends composed of Latin American women. The basic assumption of this article posits that certain communication systems are set in motion around food events in various social contexts pertaining to different national or local cuisines and culinary customs. This article focuses on the adaptation and acculturation process because it is then that immigrants are faced with an interesting duality of reconstructing their cultural perceptions to either fit the existing national collective ethos or create a new reality. In this study, the main objective is to compare two different immigrant groups: Jewish and non-Jewish women from Latin America who came to Israel during the last ten years.

Methodology

This article is based on field research conducted in Israel using a variety of sources such as: oral history, participant observation and a review of the existing literature. A total of twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions. Each interview, typically lasted one hour. Repeat informal visits with key informants were conducted individually, as well as, in a group setting. The interviews were held with Latin American women of various national origins, ages, religions and socio-economic levels in a variety of cities throughout Israel in restaurants, cafés and homes. Among the 20 participants (10 were Jewish and 10 were not Jewish), Two of the non-Jewish participants were from Mexico, five from Peru, one from Venezuela, one from the Dominican Republic and one from Chile. Among the Jewish participants, one was from Venezuela, one from Argentina and the rest were from Mexico. All the women interviewed had lived in Israel for at least one year. The participants

⁴ These concoctions were featured in a popular chain of an Israeli restaurant.

were recruited via online groups of Latin American mothers and/or women through social media outlets and using a snowball sampling technique.

Briefly, I would like to mention that the majority of the women interviewed for this article came to Israel during the last decade. For the Jewish women from Mexico and Argentina, the motivations to immigrate were primarily centered on economic issues and problems with safety issues, especially due to kidnappings and rising crime rates - including extortions, muggings, and other forms of personal assault. For the non-Jewish women, the reasons for immigrating were mainly due to health concerns and/or to follow their Israeli husbands. Their ages varied between 24 and 67. They live in such cities as Kfar Saba, Bat Yam, Rishon Lezion, Herzliya, Tel Aviv, Karmiel, Shoham, Ashdod, Petach Tikva, Kiryat Gat, Modi'in, Gedera, Rehovot, Ma'ale Adumim and Jerusalem. Of the 20 participants, 16 are currently married, 2 are divorced, 1 is widowed and 1 is single (never married). They have an average of two children.

Acculturation

The process of acculturation was different for each of the participants in this study, even though there were various elements of integration in common. For many, the process was difficult and the majority of the immigrants expressed shock and great hardship in adapting. After a while, between two to ten years after immigrating, they indeed adapted and reported feeling like they belong and have assimilated well into the Israeli culture. As Rosa, a non-Jewish Mexican woman, married to an Israeli and mother to a five month old baby articulated:

"I made Aliyah because it gave me a great hope to change scenes, as well as to live in a Jewish environment, I always felt inclined towards Judaism. Nevertheless, and despite having the great desire to live here, I thought of going back home many times in the first few months due to the inability to find myself. I felt like a fish out of water, everything tasted differently, I didn't have friends, I didn't understand the language. I questioned the decision that I had taken but they [doubts] were like existential bubbles that soon popped and vanished as I connected to cool people and got to know more places that have opened up a greater panorama to the positive things that Israel has to offer my life. Today for today, I would dare to say that I like it very much and I don't want to leave here."

This sense of not wanting to go back to their birthplaces was shared by Gloria: "My life is here with my family. I have made a good life here but I cannot help but yearn for my other life there. The life I once had and left behind. The life I had with my mother, father, brother and sister." Another Mexican non-Jewish woman, married to an Israeli and mother of two young girls commented: "Well, it was very hard at first and still in some ways since I don't have family here or many close friends or a job." Another woman lamented,

"I never felt fully accepted and always felt like my house was infected. I didn't know the religious customs with regards to mixing food. Now, I see and feel differently. I like the docility

that this country has and despite all of its problems and attacks, I feel that my son is safe if he is playing outside and he is happy here. We are here because of him."

This sense of rejection is due in part to the fact that these women have not converted to Judaism. Like it was mentioned by Maria: "I feel as if they always see me as a stranger but they are kind to me. They will never accept me as their own, so what is the use of converting?" Not everyone in this group felt the same way. For Karla who recently converted, the whole process was smooth and fast (within a year) and eagerly expressed her desire to start a family as "just another Jew." For someone else, it was a function of socio-economic status. In Peru, she lived in a large and ample house and in Israel she commented that she felt like she was in a mouse trap because of the small size of the apartment she was renting. For yet others, it was a function of the language: "I felt excluded until I finally managed to learn the language." This sense of struggle and integration were repeated throughout this study.

Tale of Two Cities

Both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv have seen a recent boom in Mexican and mixed Latin American restaurants (establishments that serve more than one national cuisine), mostly opened by Israelis who fell in love with these cuisines or their partners while traveling in the region and eating local fare. "Israel has been going through a culinary revolution, and the taste for things from the outside is growing," as one person told me. Tel Aviv has 2001 listed restaurants while Jerusalem has 804.⁵

Tel Aviv is known as cosmopolitan and is branded as the culinary and vegan capital of Israel demarcating it and defining it as culinarily and culturally distinct. Since elements of Latin American food such as *tortillas* and *arepas* (thick patties made with ground maize dough or cooked flour which are then stuffed with various fillings, prominent in the cuisine of Venezuela and Colombia) are branded as vegan and healthy, it is not surprising to find these food items prominently displayed and highlighted in menus.⁶ Tel Aviv is filled with fast food nooks and crannies and every conceivable Middle Eastern street food stand, from *falafel* to *shwarma* and *sabich*.⁷ These stands often crowd social spaces

⁵ These figures were listed on rest.co.il, <http://www.restaurants.co.il/home/doc.aspx>

⁶ Although quite similar, *arepas* are typically much thicker than *tortillas*.

⁷ *Falafel* are small balls made of mashed chickpeas, fried and usually eaten in a *pita* with salad, toppings such as pickled turnips, cucumbers or yellow peppers, eggplants, french fries and sauces. *Shwarma* are shavings that have been cut off from a rotating spit composed of marinated grilled lamb, turkey, or veal, or mixed meats. *Shwarma* can be served on a plate (generally with accompaniments), or as a sandwich with french bread or stuffed in a *pita* or *Lafa* (taboon flatbread). *Shwarma* is usually eaten with various salads and toppings similar to those eaten with *falafel* such as *tabini* (paste made from toasted ground hulled sesame seeds), *hummus* (dip made from cooked, mashed chickpeas, blended with *tabini*, olive oil, lemon juice, salt and garlic), pickled turnips, and *amba* (tangy mango pickle condiment). *Sabich* a dish brought to Israel by Iraqi

by monopolizing busy parks and street mediums. It is also dotted with restaurants serving everything from American-style burgers to sushi. Diners often have to search for a kosher restaurant, aside from those in the hotels. Residents of Tel Aviv have discerning palates which probably accounts for the rapid turnover of many eateries.⁸ Most restaurants are open seven days a week and close late. It is common practice to start dining at 10 pm. Tel Aviv's restaurants are concentrated in a few areas: Sheinkin and Rothschild streets, Basel, Ibn Gvirol Street, and the Tel Aviv Port. Tel Aviv is known for its new modern cuisine while Jerusalem is deemed a holy city and as such, religious observance seems more prevalent. Similar to Tel Aviv, Jerusalem also has a varied gastronomic topography but has some marked differences: most restaurants are kosher and are open from Sunday to Friday before sundown in accordance to Shabbat observance with some re-opening on Saturday evening after its conclusion.

The Interplay of Food and Cultural Exchanges

To begin discussing the interplay of food and cultural exchanges, their meaning, significance and modifications and how they are framed, let's take the poignant example of the ritual weekly outing of a group of Jewish Mexican women to the local coffee shop where they discuss an array of topics. This ritual of the "*cafecito*" (little coffee) is a custom that was transplanted from Mexico where friends from either high school or from the "Centro Deportivo Israelita" (The Jewish Sports Center) get together to gossip, reminisce and pass the time, weekly or even bi-weekly. Soon after the start of the encounter the conversation centered on discussing the end of the last Mexican TV soap opera and the start of the new one, its cast, program schedule and plot. Then the topic switched to the difficulties of living in Israel, especially earning a living, and finding an adequate job. Different career options were also discussed such as becoming a *Ganenet* (Hebrew word for a kindergarten teacher) or working as a retail salesperson. Two of the regular members were unemployed and bemoaning the idea of working in these occupations, something they had both done and hated. A participant expressed her desire to find a job working in Spanish or even English because she was tired of struggling with Hebrew and "breaking her teeth to be understood." She asked the rest of the group for help in finding a "suitable" job. The discussion soon turned to food, as one participant asked if the others had gone to a recently opened Mexican restaurant in the *Shuk* (Hebrew word for market) in Tel Aviv. None had gone but all promised to visit and support the owner whom they knew as a fellow *Olah* (Hebrew word for female immigrant) and an entrepreneur who had started one of the first Mexican food catering businesses in Israel. As a result of her lead, other immigrant women with limited options and language skills opted to start

immigrants, is a pita sandwich of sorts that includes salad, hard-boiled eggs, eggplant, *tabini*, *hummus*, various leafy greens and an array of spices.

⁸ Food that may be consumed according to *halakha* (Jewish law) is termed *kosher*.

catering businesses where they offer authentic Mexican food. One such woman even grows her own *tomatillos* (Spanish word for small green tomatoes used in the preparation for green salsa) and *poblano* peppers at home, which she uses to make salsas and savory dishes.

During another weekly gathering, this time at the home of one of the participants, the conversation also turned to the difficulties of living and integrating into Israeli society. One of the women there who is not Jewish, said she has a hard time knowing what is allowed and what is not in terms of religious practices, and *Kashrut*. In this case, to be Jewish or Israeli is to be part of a whole, which includes tacit knowledge of unwritten rules, *Kashrut* and prohibitions, traditional modes of cooking, preparing, serving and consuming.⁹ These non-Jewish women, for the most part, do not fit into Jewish society, so they find alternative ways of fitting into a wider Israeli-Latin American society which includes home visits and restaurant outings organized initially via the various social online groups and then independently. Their lives revolve around food as an anchor of home. As one woman told me: “wherever we go, everything at the beginning, middle and end is food.” She added: “When you cook, you belong to something, to your heritage and to your culture. You miss your country, your childhood, the flavors and spices. Here is not the same flavor and there is something of nostalgia.” This duality of self-identification and cultural pride is linked to food. Food then becomes a marker of identity. Nostalgic childhood memories become anchors of another place and time which in turn shapes present tastes and modes of cooking. In essence, by blending their Latin American Catholic past with their quasi-Jewish future, they are proclaiming, simultaneously, as being part of the Israeli collective while also proudly being Latin American.

Teresa, a non-Jewish, Peruvian mother of an eight year old son, married to an Israeli interjected:

“It’s hard to penetrate the society here but it is worth it. It is a balance between the collective peace of my home country and a sense of peace that you have here. But I don’t have any family here so I drink and cook typical dishes to feel closer to my home and family.”

These encounters are more than mere casual gatherings among friends to maintain contacts, they are important forums of socialization, networking and group cohesion. As was expressed by Deborah, an Ashkenazi mother of an adolescent, “It is nice to talk to your own people, while you are snacking.” “And get close to your country” interjected Ilana. Adding, “I love speaking Spanish and to remember times past and not having to constantly struggle to express myself.” These and other Latin American women in the study face this struggle on a daily basis. As they share meals, food becomes a tool for communication and of bonding over shared experiences.

⁹ *Kashrut* is the set of Jewish religious dietary laws.

The Role and Impact of Food

In addition to what has already been discussed, there are other ways food is used and manipulated to showcase, and celebrate Latin American culture. This is accompanied through culinary events centered on a theme such as Independence Day or charity fundraisers. In doing so, food is used as a form of entertainment and a convenient excuse to gather, as well as, branding for cultural representations of perceived modalities. In these instances, the Israeli collectivity is inadvertently exposed to other kinds of Latin American food besides the Mexican fare. These events in the public sphere highlight Israel's perceived openness and diversity. Israelis are more receptive nowadays to diverse cuisine, including Latin American. For Latin Americans, these events help them feel connected to other *paisanos* or countrymen and feel somewhat at home.

Another venue for women to feel connected in the private sphere is for women to hold gatherings at home, either as full meals or as “*asados*” or barbecues. Home cooked meals are prepared to keep nostalgia at bay and to feel connected to their homes and families. For the most part, non-Jews do not have any family or ties to Israel. Food is a medium for them to connect to other Latinas and feel as if they have an extended family. The food is unadulterated and authentic as much as it can be. Allowing small variations due to adaptations to local ingredients, when there is a necessity to do so. For Jews, cooking their native cuisines, is a conduit for remembrance and memories that have been coded and laced with spices and flavors from a home they have for the most part willingly abandoned. They often combine both cuisines into a single dish, eating *shakshuka* with *jalapeños* or *falafel* with salsa. As one woman in her thirties commented, “I add my *salsita* to everything, if I don't, it doesn't taste good.”

However, food and eating can only go so far. All of the participants cited the lack of language as the most important obstacle for their assimilation into Israeli society. Due to this and for the need for continuity by transmitting home-acquired values, all of the women interviewed, except for two, speak to their children in Spanish regardless of whether their husbands speak Spanish or not. The exceptions are a Jewish Mexican woman who is not married and has no children and one woman who is not Jewish. For the women who speak to their children in Spanish, they feel that it is a way to connect with their children and transmit their values. Accordingly, it is very important for them to connect with other Latin American women to be able to share their insecurities, worries and to feel as though they are part of a group. This is not the same for Latin American Jewish women since they automatically feel as though they belong in Israel due to the shared religion and collective ethos. The majority does not speak Hebrew upon arrival and cite that as the most crucial impediment to their integration. For them, Hebrew is the key that opens up the doors to good jobs, education and self-fulfillment. As Juana stated: “Words weigh heavily. If you don't know the language, you end up in a constant struggle between knowing and not-knowing, like pendulums swinging back and forth.” For others, it limits

the jobs they are able to acquire. For many, the lack of language acquisition is not a problem since they seek employment where there is no need to speak to others like in cleaning services or computer-related solitary positions. However, for those that are constantly interacting with people, such as in an accounting or healthcare profession, Hebrew is indispensable. Fluency is very important as well. As one woman told me: "Israelis think I am stupid because I cannot express myself better. I am smart but I cannot show it. I feel powerless and helpless and alone."

In an everyday context, such as a working environment, interaction between Jewish and non-Jewish Latin American women is limited. Relationships take on a different level when communities of choice are formed vis-à-vis online groups in social media circles. These social networks of women or Latin mothers in Israel are developed through Facebook groups and they help to blur racial and class distinctions. In creating these online spaces, they are recreating a sense of belonging and constructing an ideal and sense of identity. The place of origin becomes irrelevant when common ties which include language, food, sense of isolation and religion are formed. They have created a community of practice (Wenger 1999), one that is full of nostalgia and memories of home. These Latin American women not only form communities of practice but also transnational communities. They participate actively in the construction of connections and transnational practices so that they can develop and recreate different ethnic, affective and transcultural ties. Social networks on the internet play a fundamental role within these forums, Latin American women and/or mothers from various socio-economic and religious levels and backgrounds share a bit of everything, from everyday inquiries such as where *leche clavel* (condensed milk) can be bought, to complaints about Israeli attitudes. These virtual communities become in many cases, brick and mortar communities and serve as sources of strength, identity, transnational connections and transcultural practices. Some of these cultural production activities include social get-togethers in private homes, usually based on proximity. They also include spontaneous meet-ups in restaurants, Karaoke or "cafecito" outings as has already been mentioned. The actual location is not as important as the atmosphere that is created. Basically, any excuse to party and eat is valid, especially since it provides a reason for women to practice their Spanish and enjoy the company of fellow Latinas. In these meetings, age, religion, country of origin or socio-economic level are not important. However, on some occasions, friction and animosity was clearly visible and felt when the minority present was Jewish and the majority was not Jewish. Nevertheless, after a few encounters, these barriers also crumbled and ties of sisterhood and mutual respect are constructed. In many instances, these Jewish and non-Jewish women never had the opportunity to socialize in the same circles. For example, in Mexico, it would not be acceptable for a non-Jewish woman who cleans houses for a living to mingle with a Jewish woman just to chat. This type of interaction simply does not exist. Nevertheless, in Israel it is possible. As one woman noted: "In Israel, there are very few things

that are not possible. There are no social conventions or restrictions on mobility.” Within an Israeli cultural framework, a new form of social space is created where religion and class disappear and instead a new form of identity emerges as Latin Americans in Israel taking pride in ethnic and national characterizations.

Conclusion

For the women of this study, integrating into Israeli society was not a uniform experience. Food, religion and language were the three elements that either aided or deterred their assimilation and acculturation into the national collective. In lieu, many opted in creating their own unique spaces, using food as a medium.

In cooking traditional dishes and feeding them to their children, they are maintaining a connection and anchor to their native lands. Food is also a vehicle for their socialization with other Latin American women and/or mothers, Jewish or not. It is clear that the centrality of food in the lives of women is paramount.

The act of cooking at home with family is not only a means to feed and sustain them but is also a way to transmit cultural values embedded in the food they choose to serve them. Cooking can also be seen as a coping strategy to feel connected to their native lands. Whether it is purely Israeli, purely Mexican, purely Peruvian and so forth or a combination of these fusion dishes or in parallel eating is an extension of continuity and belonging.

The act of gathering in the public domain to drink coffee, eat, chat and bemoan Israeli society serves as an act of solidarity and builds a collective group consensus. In other words, the successful adaptation and integration of the non-Jewish women immigrants to Israel is determined by the circle of friends and online communities they choose. In these groups, they don’t have to struggle; they just share experiences and food. They are united by a sense of sisterhood and national solidarity. Differences are erased. In these forums, they are not distinguished by religion or socio-economic status as they were in their places of origin, where geography and social status governed their interactions.

The foods the women choose to eat whether in the private or public domains are markers of their hybrid complex identity that include multiple layers, whether they identify as Jewish-Israeli-Mexican-kosher-vegan or Peruvian-Christian-Israeli-meat lovers. This reflects differences between ethnic, religious and cultural elements that are imbued with coping strategies and models of food practices. These food practices are intermingled with intergenerational and interreligious discourses that are blurred with traditions and embedded in a new Israeli identity and culinary domain.

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