



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE
Humanities

UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • *Curriculum Development Project*

“If You Can’t Take the Heat”: Jewish and Islamic Dietary Restrictions in America

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Curricular Context:

Kashrut: Jewish Dietary Practices

This unit of study would take place in a high school course on rabbinic law at Jewish day-school, specifically in the context of learning about *kashrut* (dietary ritual regulations and restrictions). The students will study one topic in *kashrut* (ex. not mixing meat and dairy) by reading and analyzing biblical and Talmudic sources as well as medieval, early modern, and modern legal commentaries and case studies. In addition, students will study the philosophical, sociological, and anthropological dimensions of *kashrut* by exploring traditional literature (the insider perspective) and academic scholarship (the outsider perspective).

Among questions the class will explore are: 1) the original function/ meaning of these laws, 2) the functions/ meanings these laws acquire over time and 3) the functions/ meanings that practitioners ascribe to them.

Students will explore either their own family’s practices or those of another family. In a short paper (3-5 pages) describing and analyzing their findings, students will distinguish between the categories of mimetic transmission, custom (ethnic or regional) and law/commandment.

This initial phase will take 3-4 weeks to complete, upon which the class will shift its focus to a 1-2 week study of dietary practices in Islam.

Halal: Islamic Dietary Practices

1) Textual Sources: The Qur'an forbids the consumption of pork, blood, and any meat over which the name of any god other than Allah has been invoked. The Qur'an also mandates certain specifications when it comes to ritual slaughter (similar to Jewish specifications, although some Muslims will still only eat meat slaughtered by a Muslims). The status of wine in the Qur'an is more complicated, as there are a few ambiguous statements, only one of which prohibits alcohol. The Hadith are clearer when it comes to mandating abstention. See Qur'an 2:173, 5:3, 6:145, 16:115; 16:67, 2:219, 4:43, 5:90-1. (Also see archeology which suggests that early Muslims did drink alcohol, for example: Hisham's Palace in the city of Jericho. See Hadith.)

2) Questions: What is the relationship between the Qur'an and Hadith? What are some of the traditional reasons given for these laws and restrictions? From a historical and comparative point of view, what is the explanation for these restrictions? Are there variations in different Islamic sects as to how these laws are implemented? Have the laws changed over time? How does the Qur'an view the original biblical legislation and the dietary practices that were normative among Jews of the period and region?

3) Comparisons between Jewish and Islamic Dietary Laws: How does the Islamic legal tradition compare with the Jewish legal tradition (the relationship between the Written and Oral Law)? In what ways do Jewish and Islamic practices diverge from the biblical text and what is the specific hermeneutic (or external reason) which paves the way for this divergence? Do Jewish and Islamic texts comment on the other's traditions when it comes to dietary practices?

See: David Freidenreich "Dietary Law" in *Oxford Handbook of Abrahamic Religions*; David Freidenreich *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law*;

Lived Religion and Dietary Restrictions:

The class will be divided into two groups of twelve, one of which will study *kashrut* in American Judaism and one of which will study *halal* in American Islam. Each of these two groups will be further sub-divided into four groups of three. These sub-groups, in turn, will explore different ways that the dietary practices associated with the respective religions "work" and "don't work" in America and will create ten-minute presentations of their findings.

Possible projects for *kashrut*:

1) Kashrut in seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century America (ex. Asser Levy <http://tenement.org/blog/meet-assar-levy-new-yorks-first-kosher-butcher/>; kosher food at the Federal Parade of 1788)

- 2) Kosher certification (politics, economics, different standards and organizations)
- 3) Kosher restaurants
- 4) Survey of kosher practices (both normative and idiosyncratic) among various Jewish groups
- 5) Interviews with rabbis and scholars of Jewish law
- 6) Scandals associated with kosher meat

Possible projects for *halal*:

- 1) Compare the latest Pew Forum on Muslims in America with the latest Pew Forum on Jews in America
- 2) Interviews with an *imam* from a local mosque
- 3) Survey of local Muslims (through a partnership with local Islamic center)
- 4) *Halal* certification and restaurants See: <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/bronx/muslim-women-institute-bronx-food-pantries-open-thanks-100-000-donation-collegiate-church-corporation-article-1.994909>
- 5) Movements to boycott or outlaw *halal*

Conclusions:

Using the information and data gathered, the class will collaboratively create a chart tracking similarities and differences between *kasbrut* and *halal* and ways in which these respective ritual systems have shaped and been shaped by their implementation in America. (Possible categories to chart: percentage of the respective populations that observe these laws, how do “secular” contexts accommodate these laws and how do practitioners deal with contexts when their food is unavailable, how practitioners understand these laws, economics of certification).

See: <https://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/rosenberg14/halal-and-kosher/>

For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, see: www.religiousworldsnyc.org.