

Community Cookbooks and the Remembrance of *Kugels* Past

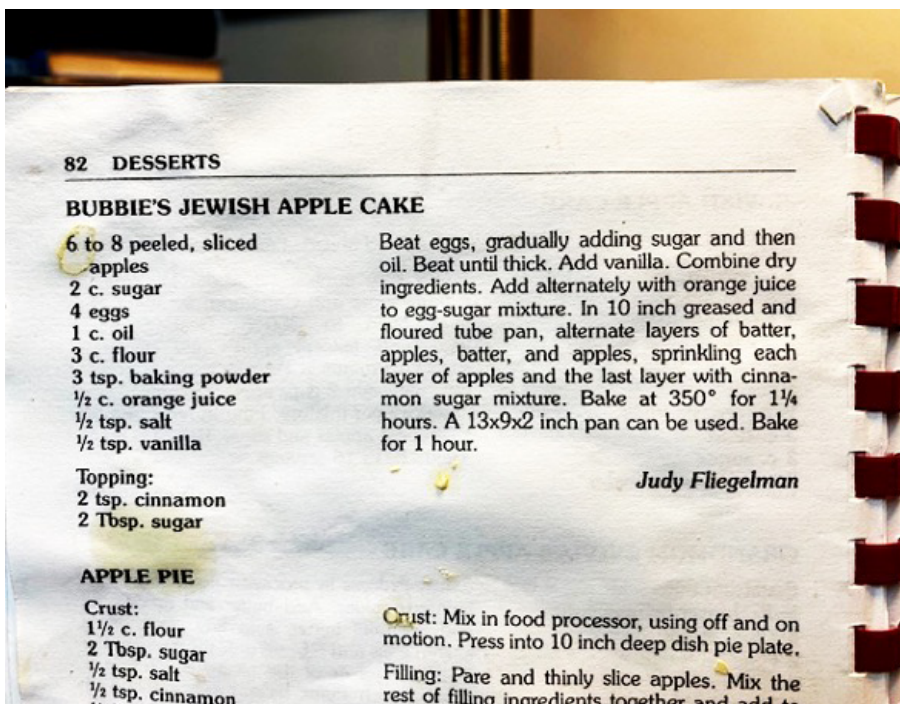
Joanna Radin and Mark Stern

Scene 1 – Mark Stern

My mom recently suffered a stroke¹ and, while helping out at the apartment she lives in with my dad, I was poking through closets and drawers for artifacts that reminded me of my 1980s childhood. In the hospital, I was present to her horizontal needs. Back at the apartment, I dissociated through artifacts that let her be vertical, leaning over the kitchen sink in the house where we grew up, having gotten home from work, under a halo of bad fluorescent lighting, singing a Billy Joel song (preferably from the album *Turnstiles*), with a Phillies game on the TV above the fridge. This is not a specific memory, and I am not sure all these things actually ever happened at the same time. And yet it is a memory I know is real.

¹ She is doing much better now.

What is also real is that I have been appropriating things from my parents' apartment for at least fifteen years, a timeframe which coincides with my dad's drastic health deterioration. A crewneck sweatshirt here. A tote bag there. A bottle of Aqua Velva. A mug with my mom's initials. Relatively small things, but ritual items that keep them present to me. It was in this sticky-fingered mode that I came across (and stole) the 1994 edition of *Culinary Creations*, a community cookbook put out by the Sisterhood of Congregation Or Ami, the synagogue my family attended. I remembered this book immediately. Because each recipe was contributed by a member of the community, and because we knew most of the people in that community, there was always something slightly voyeuristic about looking through it. As someone who has since come to own LOTS of cookbooks, I was immediately taken by the kinship and familiarity I felt in flipping through the pages. I could smell and taste so many of these recipes. These were memories of my grandparents, holidays, long rides in the car with my sister, and of my parents, all of which felt more like the photographs from family albums. The recipes were food, but the memories were people.



Drops of batter from a tried and tested recipe.
Photo: Mark Stern, 2025.

Community cookbooks like this became staples of civic organizations such as religious congregations, schools, services clubs in the United States in the twentieth century. While diverse in origin, Alton Brown (2010: xi) suggests that such volumes share certain qualities: they are often spiral-bound, recipes are submitted by people in the community, they are democratic as everybody gets to submit without editorial or taste censorship, and they speak to and of a specific place at a particular moment in time. Created, curated and circulated overwhelmingly by women, the tens of thousands of these cookbooks can be understood as a kind of roux that mediated social, political and ancestral bonds (Bower 1997; Lindgren and Germer 2018). In them it is possible to identify strains of the prominence of home economics, new technologies, women's work

and, among other things, the centrality of civic organizations in everyday life (Shapiro 1996). Insofar as infrastructures refer to cathections between people, land, time and nonhuman ecologies, these cookbooks are gooey infrastructures, rooted in domestic spaces, where communities archived their histories and aspirations.² They are, as Janet Theophano (2002: 70) writes, “a guide to the identity and ethos of a community [and] a story [the group] tell[s] themselves about themselves.”

² See, for example, the number of *trayf*, Yiddish for non-Kosher, recipes in synagogue editions.

It makes sense, then, as to why this particular cookbook, dotted with splotches of grease and batter, seemed so important at this moment in my own life – a time when I was grappling with the transient, yet grounding, nature of community and identity. Community cookbooks like this one, as per the acknowledgements page of Culinary Creations (1994: i), started as a “fund raising project and quickly became a ‘fun raising’ project.” This cookbook was something that helped me remember the funds of the past as my parents and I moved into a yet to be determined future.

Scene 2 – Joanna Radin

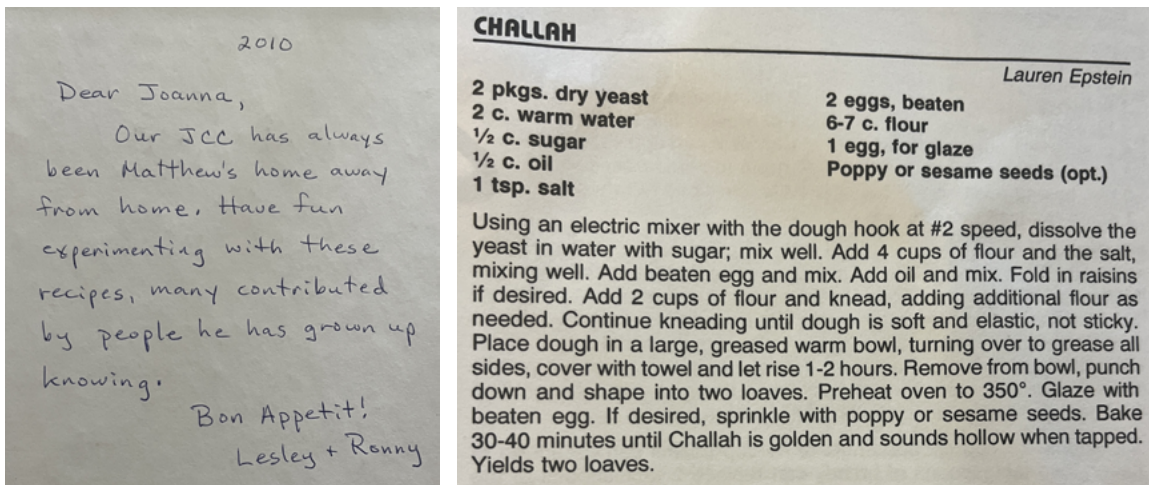
I feel obliged to tell you of an old saying: “If a woman can’t make a kugel – divorce her.” I disapprove of this.

Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish*

I had already been married to Matthew for three years when his parents, Lesley and Ronny, gifted me *Still Cookin’ After All These Years*, a cookbook produced in honor of the 75th anniversary of their Jewish Community Center in Binghamton, New York. The book had been published in 2003 by [Morris Press Cookbooks](#) of Kearney, Nebraska, which claims to be “The Number One Publisher of Cookbooks in America.” Accordingly, it bore the trademark binding and standardized formatting that facilitated the compilation of recipes that otherwise existed on stained scraps of paper, bent index cards, or in the muscle memory of their makers. In 2010, Matthew was a newly minted medical doctor – that sought-after species of American Jewish masculine achievement. His mother was anxious that he should remain well fed. The inscription in *Still Cookin’* made it clear that I, his wife, was to do the feeding. Out of resentment and pride in my own journey towards doctorhood, albeit as a historian of medicine, I stowed the book on a high shelf with no intention of using it.

Many more years later than any of our parents would have wished, Matthew and I had a son. He turned one in March of 2020. In that first season of COVID, cut off from family, as well as our workplaces, Mark – a dear friend we had shared for nearly 20 years – came to live with us for a while. Three doctors (two of us PhDs) and a baby. My own expertise suggested to me that the pandemic and its consequences would stretch far beyond spring, as had the 1918 influenza a century earlier. For the first time in nearly a decade, *Still Cookin’* spoke to me, offering to feed my hunger for connection. Together, we baked our own *challah* to celebrate the Sabbath – as much a means of marking the otherwise undifferentiated time of quarantine as for braiding the queer family we had effectively become.³ Lauren Epstein’s *challah* recipe became one of the first solid foods our son learned to enjoy.

³ Theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel’s (1951: 2) depiction of the Sabbath as an “architecture in time” directly informed our efforts to seek solace from temporal disorientation in ritual.



Summer turned to autumn and Matthew started pining for kugel, the comfort casserole of his youth. I had never developed a taste for this squishy casserole, and encouraged Matthew to satisfy his own yen. Still Cookin' came down off the shelf once again. Unlike the challah, which garnered only one entry, there were nearly twenty recipes for kugel. The sole ingredient they shared was eggs, ranging from one to eight, a binding agent for infinite permutations of carbohydrate. He landed on "Very Rich Kugel," the sole kugel recipe supplied by a man – indeed it was one of the only recipes in the whole cookbook not contributed by a woman. Matthew claimed it was purely the promise of decadence that hailed him, but I could not help but wonder if there were other forms of recognition at play.

If a man cannot make kugel for himself, find him a cookbook with evidence of one who can.

← A loving inscription from in-laws to author.

Photo: Joanna Radin, 2025.

→ Challah recipe, an architecture in bread.

Photo: Joanna Radin, 2025.

Scene 3 – Us

During the summer of 2025 we found ourselves in the Green Mountains of Vermont. Mark's wife Leah and daughter Orly, beautiful additions to the family we have been weaving, had gathered to practice what have come to be known as 'earth skills' in a setting overlaid with Jewish teachings. Weaving was more than a metaphor, given that Leah had recently returned from a weaving class at a folk school in North Carolina, her loom in tow. It was Leah who had brought us to this gathering, called in Hebrew *Melacha U'vracha* (הכרבו הכאלמ), 'The work of our hands and the blessings they bring'). Mark's parents had been in and out of the hospital all summer, while Matthew was stranded there as an on-call physician. We were tired but also hungry, in need of practices that would help us feel more alive, a part of something bigger than our individual struggles.

As we sat around a makeshift kitchen table on the side of a mountain, Mark guided us in the preparation for pickling of fruits and vegetables harvested from his garden. "What recipe are you using?" asked one of the organizers of the gathering. As my six-year-old son, Raphi, gained confidence peeling carrots and chopping cabbage, Mark

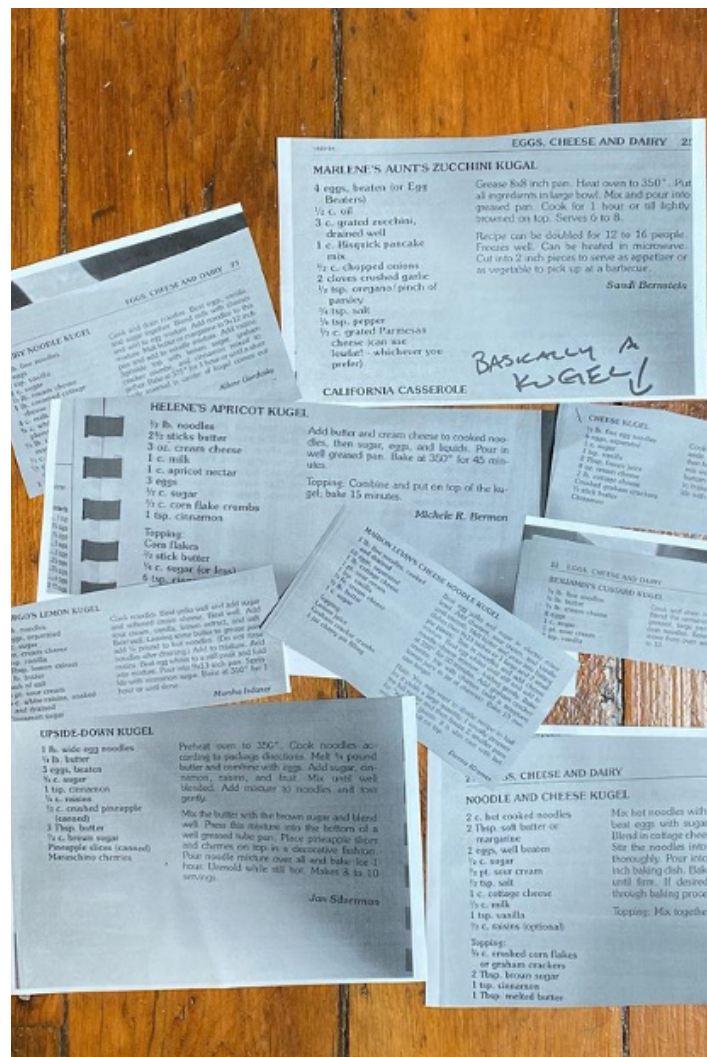
replied that the recipe, not actually found in any of the community cookbooks we have come to treasure, was simply in his head and in his hands. We were fermenting – making culture out of life – and preserving that knowledge in the form of food to eat when we were no longer co-present.

The recipes in the community cookbooks we reached for were interventions of a previous generation in the flow of time, efforts to preserve moments where knowing hands and heads might not be accessible. What it has meant to be Jewish in community is different for us from what it was for our parents. Community cookbooks preserve a snapshot of a much messier and dynamic past, available for life in diasporas of space and time. What kinds of records will we leave from our own efforts at making community? It is our deepest wish that our children know how to nourish their bodies as well as their souls, even if those lessons are not spiral bound.

← 20 from Still Cooking After All These Years.
Photo: Joanna Radin, 2025.

→ 9 from Culinary Creations.
Photo: Mark Stern, 2025.

Scene 4 – Two Community Cookbooks, 29 Kugel Recipes



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Pedagogical Provocations

1. How did these cookbooks constitute a sense of community? Are there contemporary examples of artefacts that do the same?
2. What kinds of experiences do cookbooks make possible beyond the opportunity to prepare a recipe?

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