



## **CENTURIES OF FOOD AT YOUR TABLE: A MEDIEVAL SEPHARDIC COOKBOOK**

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and our conversation with Dr. Hélèn Jawhara Piñer. Hélèn Jawhara Piñer holds a PhD in medieval history, focusing on the history of food, and she's a Sephardic chef. She's lectured at Yale, the University of Pennsylvania, Bar-Ilan University, the Casa de Velázquez of Madrid, the Weitzman Museum of Philadelphia, and hosted one of the most popular sessions of the great big Jewish food fest.

JH: She has published articles in the Forward, Table Magazine, Tablet magazine, Hadassah, Moment Magazine and others. And she's the author of 'Sephardi: Cooking the History. Recipes of the Jews of Spain and the Diaspora, from the 13th Century to Today', which came out in 2021. As well as today's topic, 'Jews, Food, and Spain: The Oldest Medieval Spanish Cookbook and the Sephardic Culinary Heritage', which was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award. Hélèn Jawhara Piñer, thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Hélèn Jawhara Piñer: Hi, I'm very glad to be part of this program.

JH: I'd like to start with the medieval Spanish cookbook to which you refer in the book 'Jews, Food, and Spain'. Indeed, your book doesn't merely describe medieval Jewish Spanish food, rather it relies on a medieval Arabic language cookbook as a culinary illustration of the interrelationships among Jews and other Spaniards in medieval Spain. So to kick us off, introduce us if you would, to this remarkable manuscript.

HP: This manuscript is very special. The manuscript is called Kitab al-Tabikh. Kitab is the Arabic word for book and Tabikh... Tabikh, it's the Arabic word for cuisine. It's the oldest medieval Spanish cookbook that has been written in the west. It dates back to the 13th century. And furthermore, this is in fact the only one that contains explicitly Jewish recipes. That's why it is totally unique and that's why I have spent almost two years of my PhD doctorate working on it.

JH: Before we dive into the manuscript itself and talk about the Jews of Spain, I'd like to ask you a question as one who thinks about food and culture in general. What do we learn about a culture through food that we can never learn about from documents, music, art, and other sources?

HP: The first lesson is that food is authentic. It's what you eat daily and you choose what kind of food you eat. So when you eat something, it's part of you. It reflects who you are or what you want people to think about you. Those studies are quite a new way to understand history. When one goes deeper and deeper into history, it is a mistake not to take into account the food and culinary practices of the people you are working on. Because when you understand the food practices and the culinary practices of one people, you really understand not only their food habits, but you also understand the political context, the economical context, the religious context of the country or of the territory where those people are living. So it's indeed very fascinating.

JH: It is fascinating. And in order to get to that, you need to have information. And among other things, outside of this remarkable manuscript, you discovered how little information we have on Spanish Jewish food from the Middle Ages. You learned that Jewish food in general is either very limitedly recorded in cookbooks related to family history, or it's overwhelmingly Ashkenazic. So why do you think it is that there's so little information about this corner of Jewish food in history?

HP: This question is very interesting. If we talk about Spain, we have evidences concerning the fact that the Jews have been living in Spain since the second century. Nevertheless, we do not have, as you perfectly said, evidences concerning Jewish food practices until the 13th century in Spain. Thanks to this cookbook, it highlights that there are no evidences concerning the food practices. Because maybe it was not important to highlight the Jewish food practices.

HP: What is interesting is that between the 13th century and the 15th century, the main evidences we have are concerning the recipes that are written in this oldest medieval Spanish cookbook. And then we do not have other big references. The main ones are really from this culinary source. And then since the 15th century, we have other kinds of sources that also highlight new culinary practices of the Jews, but through another kind of sources.

JH: The work that you do in this book is really detective work, trying to distill Jewish elements from layers of other cultures, cuisine, history, and sublimation, thanks to generations of persecution, all of which are wrapped up in the Kitab al-Tabikh, the manuscript we're talking about. Give us one example of a food whose Jewish character you had to uncover and excavate and tell us how you did it.

HP: I'm gonna give you two examples I should have mentioned just before. Something which is very, very important to understand Jewish practices in Spain, at least at the beginning and then in the diaspora. Jews never ruled the territory of Spain, so they always had to abide by the laws of the rulers. So if the rulers were bad people, that's what happened. They used their knowledge concerning Jewish food practices to identify people. So that's why we can see and we can

understand an evolution of the culinary practices of the Jews, because when they were living under Muslim domination in the 13th century, they were living under a dogmatic Muslim domination that did not allow them to eat and to cook the way they wanted to do. And then when the Christians came to rule the country at the beginning of the 15th century, the same or worse happened.

HP: So they also had to change their food and culinary practices. So this is why it has been, and it is still, very hard to understand and to find evidences concerning one Jewish dish or the origin of a dish that we can prove this dish has been prepared by and only by Jews. So to answer your question, the first discovery I could mention dates back to a recipe from the 13th century, and it is mentioned in the Kitab al-Tabikh. It is a recipe that do not have the word Jew or Jewish in the title of the recipe. It's a recipe that is in fact the first recipe in the world we have that refers to what nowadays is Mofletta. So it is in fact a dish that the Moroccan Jews did prepare today to celebrate the end of Passover. And it is like different kinds of layers of dough. It looks like a tower, and you have to pour over honey and butter. And this recipe, which name is Muraqabah in the Kitab al-Tabikh, does not bear the name Jewish dish or something like this. It's just a name in Arabic. But in fact, thanks to the process, and thanks to the fact that this recipe is still nowadays prepared by Moroccan Jews, mainly in diaspora, we know that this recipe was a recipe made by Jews. Because thanks to transmission, it is not the only one, but it's in one of evidence.

JH: I'd just like to clarify that when you speak about diaspora, you're speaking about the Sephardic diaspora, not the Jewish diaspora as a whole.

HP: Yes.

JH: The Sephardic diaspora is all the Jews who trace their roots to Spain, but don't live in Spain anymore. As opposed to the Jewish diaspora, which is all the Jews in the world who live outside of Israel, but by virtue of being Jewish, trace their roots to the land of Israel. So we're talking about the Sephardic diaspora. We know that Muslim Spain was famous for the acculturation and interaction among the three cultures, namely Christian, Muslim, and Jewish. But it sounds like it was more complicated, both on a cultural level and on a religious level. How does that play itself out in the food that we learn about in the Kitab?

HP: There has been acculturation and multiculturalism in Spain between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. But this worked until the 12th century. After the 12th century, this did not work anymore. In fact, some problems started even in the 11th century because we had evidences concerning pogroms against Jews in Granada in 1066. So the situation started to be very bad for Jews since the 11th century. In fact, since the first dynasty came to Spain and ruled the country. So Jews and Muslims were closer than with the Christians, at least concerning food practices. This is quite easy to understand, because Jews and Muslims have in common the fact that they do not eat pork. And this is the main ingredient that allow us to understand the difference between the semitic food culture and the Christian culture.

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JH: You use cultural clues to argue that the Kitab may have been written by a Muslim or a Jew, but not by a Christian. How did you arrive at that conclusion?

HP: I have different evidences that could prove this. The first is that at that time in the 13th century, Christians were not familiar with translating documents and they did not have any interest in medicine for example. Kitab al-Tabikh, it's a very special cookbook because it's like half a cookbook and half a medical book, like a dietary book. You have a lot of references that prove that the author was maybe a doctor. So what we can say is that this author who is anonymous, knew very, very well dietary laws of the Jews. And this is very special, because we can really think that the author was a Jewish doctor.

HP: For example, in a lot of recipes, the author says that the meat need to be salted. Or, for example, you have to remove the tendon from the meat. And Muslims do not have to follow those practices. Only Jews. This is why this is my opinion and my theory that the author of this cookbook is a Jewish Doctor.

JH: In following this line of the cultural identity of the author and a culture that's represented, you speak of the food trio that speaks particularly to cultural identity and Judaism most of all. The three are bread, wine, and meat. And we know that in medieval Jewish law, wine serves as a litmus test for someone who is Jewish or not. If someone's wine is kosher for consumption, it means they're Jewish. And if it's not, then their wine is called Stam Yeinam in Hebrew, and it means that they're not part of the Jewish community. Wine has incredible importance as a signal in that way. And we also know that bread has strong associations with matzah and of course, meat, as you just described, has all kinds of very, very salient implications for how it's prepared both halal and kosher. What else did we find in the Kitab aside from the meat that you described in this trio of foods.

HP: We have a lot of interesting references concerning, for example unleavened bread, or as I told you previously, concerning the fact that you have to remove the tendon from the meat. And also we have in the Kitab al-Tabikh, I think it's like six recipes that contain wine. If this cookbook has been written by a Muslim author, we would not have been able to find recipes with wine inside. Because this cookbook has been written under a dogmatic dynasty that had a very strict view of Islam. Furthermore, you have also other ingredients that can work as evidences of Jewish cuisine. For example, the use of olive oil instead of fat from the meat as the Muslims used to use in their dishes.

JH: I'd like to talk about this term that you described in your book called "The Real and the Imagined Cuisine". Anyone in a Sephardic family knows that we romanticize Spain in ways that Ashkenazim do not usually romanticize the Shtetl or Eastern Europe, for example. There is real

nostalgia amongst Sephardim to this day and a very powerfully imagined past. How does that imagination play out in the realm of food?

HP: Oh, this is very important. I really like this question. In fact, the part of nostalgia in Sephardic food is very relevant, and we cannot understand Sephardic Jewish food without this nostalgia part. Why? Because Jews have been living in Spain since the second century, and they were expelled officially in the 15th century. So when Sephardic Jews eat, it's like they are eating part of their past history, and this is a way, in fact, to remember their ancestors. Also, in Sephardic cuisine, we still have dishes that date back to the 13th century, and we continue to prepare them. So we cannot, and we do not want to lose this nostalgic part because it's us. It's inside. That's why it's very important.

JH: It's obvious that you wrote this book with a great deal of scholarly interest and deep research, but also a great deal of love and investment. What surprised you in writing this book most of all?

HP: At the beginning of my PhD, I did not think that I was going to be as passionate by this. I obviously knew that I really wanted to work on the evolution of Jewish food and food practices. But when I started my PhD I was just thinking about highlighting Jewish food practices and Muslim practices, but then I realized that we have so much to share and we have so much to do and we have to go deeper in our research to highlight Jewish food practices. Because in my point of view, we do not know enough concerning our past. And food is a way to fix this. I think it's one of the best way because everybody is interesting by food we eat and it's synonymous of sharing and transmission and generation and pleasure. And when you know that this dish that you are preparing and that your grandma did, this dish tastes very special because it's part of you.

JH: Dr. Hélène Jawhara Piñer, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons Podcast for this fascinating talk about medieval Jewish food.

HP: Thanks so much for inviting me.

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons Podcast, available wherever you listen to your podcasts. And check out HUC connect, compelling conversations at the forefront of Jewish learning. For more information about all that HUC Connect has to offer, visit [huc.edu/hucconnect](http://huc.edu/hucconnect).

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