CHINESE FOOD ON CHRISTMAS
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Twas the night before Christmas and there was hardly a sound,
As Jews jumped in their cars and drove to Chinatown.
Their orders were given to waiters with care,
In hopes that wonton soup soon would be there.
The children finished their noodles and nestled in their beds,
While visions of fortune cookies danced in their heads.

(adapted from a poem by Moment Senior Editor Nonna Gorilovskaya)

Growing up my parents kept a kosher home. We had three sets of dishes, mikek, flyesech and Chinese food. Actually, the third set were really paper plates, but the only non-kosher thing we were ever allowed to bring into the house and eat on them was Chinese Food. It was known as "Safe Treyf", which also happens to be the title of a 24 page scholarly academic paper by sociologists Gaye Tuchman and Harry G. Levine published in 1992 in the volume, “Contemporary Ethnography”.

Yes the connection between Jews and Chinese Food, particularly Chinese Food during the Christmas Holiday is one of academic research, not to mention a few Seinfeld episodes, Philip Roth novels, US Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan’s senate confirmation hearing and many social media posts; It’s also the subject of tonight’s sermon.

You may remember that pivotal moment during Justice Kagan’s 2010 confirmation hearing when at a particularly contentious moment, South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham directed the discussion to the 2009 Christmas Day bombing attempt on a Detroit-bound airliner.

Graham then asked the candidate where she was on Christmas Day. Justice Kagan famously answered, “You know, like all Jews, I was probably at a Chinese restaurant.”

Her comment provoked laughter and reduced the level of tension in the room. Recognizing that some in the room might be unfamiliar with the custom, Sen. Charles Schumer of New York then explained how Jews had a special affinity with eating out at Chinese restaurants on Christmas because they were the only restaurants open in New York City.

Her deadpan response: “You know, like all Jews, I was probably at a Chinese restaurant.”

Jews eating Chinese food on Christmas has become somewhat of a punchline, but is it actually a proven phenomenon?

It is indeed. And there are historical, sociological, and religious reasons for immigrant Jews finding their way from their kosher homes to Chinese restaurants.

Let's go back to the 1890s – the days of the teeming tenements on New York's Lower Eastside. Initially, Jews didn't leave their neighborhood much, and hardly ever ventured out to non-kosher restaurants. So how did they end up eating Chinese food?

Jews and Chinese were the two largest non-Christian immigrant groups on the lower Eastside at the turn of the 20th century. Other restaurants on the lower Eastside would typically be Italian or Polish – Catholic, closed on Christmas - but also serving a lot of dishes that mixed meat and dairy.

Jewish and Chinese immigrants were linked by proximity, and by otherness – both were stereotypical outsiders. Being outsiders themselves, Chinese restaurant owners didn't discriminate. They did not care whether they served blacks or Jews. They treated all their customers the same. This was unique at a time when a Jewish person could be turned away at the door of an Italian restaurant.

As New York's Jewish population surged from about 400,000 in 1899 to close to a million only 10 years later (a quarter of the city's population), Jews slowly began to assimilate, especially the second generation. They started to explore, remaining strict in their home observance but becoming more flexible with the foods they ate outside the home.

This phenomenon is well documented:

In 1903, the Yiddish-language newspaper the Forward coined the Yiddish word *oysessen* — eating out — to describe the growing custom of Jews eating outside the home in New York City.

As I mentioned, Chinese food excludes dairy from its dishes – many Asians – like many Jews – are lactose intolerant. As a result, Jews could easily trick themselves into believing that they were eating kosher food at Chinese restaurants. So, there is the illusion of adhering to kashrut… and there is after all a striking similarity between a kreplach and a wonton.

Of course, it wasn't so easy to ignore that Chinese food was filled with pork and shellfish. Initially, some just held their nose and ate it. And then, sometime in the post-war years, we get the legal fiction, humorous designation not unique to the Moskowitz Family finest paper plates of "safe treyf."

Obviously, treyf is forbidden but "safe treyf" means it's forbidden but OK.
If you can't see the pork in the wonton soup stock, well, it's OK. Or if the shrimp in the shrimp chop suey is chopped up into little tiny pieces so that you really can't recognize what it is, then it must be OK to eat.

To be clear, our family kept a more observant level of “safe treif” – we didn’t eat pork or shellfish even in Chinese food; but we also didn’t care if our sweet and sour chicken, came from a wok that had just made mushu pork. Well, we cared but we just didn’t ask and passed the vegetarian egg rolls.

And what about eating Chinese food on Christmas? It dates at least as early as 1935 when The New York Times reported a certain restaurant owner named Eng Shee Chuck who brought chow mein on Christmas Day to the Jewish Children’s Home in Newark. Over the years, Jewish families and friends gather on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day at Chinese restaurants across North America, I even have friends who now practice this custom in Israel. They gather to socialize and to banter, to reinforce social and familiar bonds, and to meet before or after another favorite activity for Jews during the Christmas holiday – catching a movie.

The Chinese restaurant has become a place where Jewish identity is made, remade and announced.

The following articles and sermons were consulted in constructing this sermon:

- 'Tis the season: Why do Jews eat Chinese food on Christmas? - Jewish World - Haaretz.com
- For Some, It's a Very Moo Shu Christmas - The New York Times
- We Eat Chinese On Christmas | Jewish Week
- "Safe Treyf" , New York Jews and Chinese Food By Gaye Tuchman and Harry G. Levine
- Why Do American Jews Eat Chinese Food on Christmas? - The Atlantic
- Chinese Food on Christmas, by Rabbi Sabine Meyer