

Forbidden: Jews and the Pig

Published 3 March 2025, with Jordan Rosenblum.

Almost everybody knows that Jewish dietary laws absolutely forbid pork. But why? That's the central question of a new book from Jordan Rosenblum, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Rosenblum's point is that if you start from the Hebrew Bible, there's nothing special in it that would make the pig stand out.

Jordan: If you look at biblical texts, the same text that taboos the pig, taboos camels and rock badgers and hares. Outside of that text, where they're tabooed, the pig only appears five other times in the Hebrew Bible, but other biblically non-kosher animals that are also taboo in the same passages, like the eagle, appear several times more. So if all you had was the biblical text, you would presume that other animals are even more tabooed. So it doesn't stand out. And that's one of the more interesting things, is that because if you stand 3000 years later and look backwards, it seems inevitable. But if you start the timeline the other way, looking from the ancient world towards the future, what unfolds is not predictable. You wouldn't have bet on it.

Jeremy: So why does it unfold in that way?

Jordan: Well, a series of things. So I argue that in the Second Temple period, you have a series of texts where, um, ...

Jeremy: I think, I think we need to go back and have a quick refresher on the history of Judaism, very quickly.

Jordan: Very quickly. I'd say there's the biblical period, which is ... The religion of the Bible is a sacrificial religion. The ancient Israelites would go to a temple. Eventually it becomes only one temple, the temple in Jerusalem, and they would offer animal sacrifices to God, and by a priestly class that would offer them. If you live far away, you could send money or animals to the temple. And then ... I'll skip over a lot of important things. I'll skip. I'll just say this history to get us to the things that we need for pig. There's one Temple, gets destroyed. It

gets rebuilt. Then that becomes the Second Temple period, which is 515 BCE to 70 CE; 515 BC is when that Second Temple is rededicated, 70 CE is when the Romans, and that's going to be important, destroy the the Second Temple. After 70 CE there's this void, and Judaism tries to figure out what to do. Are they going to rebuild the temple? What are they going to do? A group rises that becomes the sort of dominant expression of Judaism until today, which is Rabbinic Judaism, that seeks to translate a temple based religion to a world that doesn't have a temple. So it replaces daily sacrifice with daily prayer, sacrifice with study of biblical and rabbinic texts, and comes up with rituals to make sense of the world in which those communities then live.

Jeremy: Okay, back to the second Temple.

Jordan: Zoom back to the Second Temple period. Right. So the temple sacrifice is going on. There's some, some text, the book of the Maccabees, that talks about the story behind what is the modern Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. And they talk about a time when foreign rulers are trying to express dominance over Judaism. And there are Jews who are forced to either eat pig or be martyred, or be gruesomely killed. And these texts, in detail, say these Jews who choose to reject eating pig and because they view that as submitting to the other, to the foreign domination and, as represented, giving up their Jewish values and Jewish practices. And so in these texts, pig starts to take on more weight as an important differentiator. And what this probably comes down to is the fact that, of the meats that are most commonly eaten, you think about cow, sheep, goat, pig is the most commonly eaten, clearly not kosher meat, right? And so it probably stood out that way. Right? Because I mentioned the eagle. But how common was it for people to eat eagle? You know, not so common.

Jordan: And so it seems to take on more weight in Jewish sources. In fact, if people know about Hanukkah, they know about the miracle of the oil. But that story doesn't appear until like 600 to 1000 years later. So, in the most early versions of the story behind Hanukkah, we learn more about the pig than oil. And so what I argue is that these texts, that starts to stand out more. And then non-Jews, you see this in Roman sources, for example, they start commenting on, hey, it's weird that Jews don't eat pig. And then as rabbinic sources come into the fore, they start commenting more on how it's important to not eat

pig. And it starts to become more and more symbolic and talked about more and more, and then it just becomes a snowball effect. Both Jews and non-Jews talk about it more and more and more as representing Jewish identity. And so that's how that story explodes outward in a, in a completely unpredictable way, if you're looking at it from antiquity.

Jeremy: So if the Romans had been eating, eating camel, which a lot of people still do, it could have gone to the camel?

Jordan: It could have. That's a whole other ... You know, in some, depending on your views of physics. Right. In some other parallel universe, I, I'm talking about, you know, *Forbidden: A 3000 Year History of Jews and the Camel*.

Jeremy: So the martyrdom of the Second Temple period, when when Jews would rather die than eat pig, the rabbis kind of changed their mind on that.

Jordan: Yes. So, and it's interesting because ... So in the book of the Maccabees are reflecting a very Greek and Roman notion of the idea that to reject eating pig is to show self-control and self-mastery, which the rabbis also agree with. But to pretend to eat pig would be to lose face and to, to not live a principled life anymore. The rabbis, based on a different interpretation. They look at a biblical text that talks about the commandments and that you shall live by them. And they very clearly say, well, live by them means live by them and not die by them. And so they say ... Except for three exceptions, three exceptions. One is murder. So unjustified homicide. So someone says, I will kill you unless you kill that other person. They say you should let yourself be killed because who are you to decide, right? Who are you to play God? Whose blood is redder? Idolatry, because for them, that is the complete opposite of everything. You're supposed to be a monotheist. And so to commit idolatrous acts is to violate every principle. And forbidden sexual relations. So for example, incest.

But eating pig ... If someone says eat pig or die, it's better to live by it. And so they don't say, you know, so they wouldn't say go order pig because you're hungry. But if you're presented with the option that is presented in the Book of Maccabees, they have a very different take on it. And that comes ... that's from a different historical perspective. And that's also one of the the stories that comes out from this book, is you're also looking at the history of Judaism as it develops in

different times and places, different legal and exegetical practices develop. And the pig is one way of telling that story.

Jeremy: The willingness to eat pig or secretly refraining from eating pig. I mean, that becomes quite big in converting countries. Like I mean, you've got that in Spain and elsewhere, that people who are nominally Christian but are suspected of not eating pig are tested.

Jordan: Yes. I mean, there's ... It's long been a theory that you go in Spain and you see these big pigs in the window, that that is a carryover of the Inquisition, where we have records of many people being accused of not eating pig and so therefore being suspect that they are secretly practicing Judaism. So what's the way to show that is, look, I have a huge pig in the front. Look. Look how Catholic I am. Right. And the symbolism of it, right, very clearly points to that. Because if someone I mean, we have texts of people saying, no, I eat plenty of other non-kosher foods. I just don't like pig, right? But that is seen as so symbolic that it becomes an easy way of letting people know how Catholic you are, or attempting to conceal how Jewish you are.

Jeremy: But the question of no, I don't, I just don't like pig. I mean that that conflicts with most people, who seem to think that pork is the most delicious meat.

Jordan: Yes. And there are sources going back to the ancient world. It's amazing how many Jewish sources I have found that talk about how pig is the most delicious meat. And you wonder is, do they have first hand knowledge or not? But actually that becomes part of ... So for Jewish sources, it becomes part of a way of saying, acknowledging, right? It's not that pig isn't delicious, it's that it is. But you're choosing to show fidelity to God by not eating it. And then there are other sources that ... Christian sources, that say it's the most delicious meat. What kind of a god would want you to not eat that?

Jeremy: Both of those seem to me to be good points. I mean, you know, you're sacrificing yourself, and God is demanding that sacrifice of you. So I guess it makes sense. God demands sacrifice, and you make the sacrifice, right?

Jordan: And you're right that there are both points where what is your ... What it often is, is working backwards, is, what is your final conclusion. And then how can you use pig to support it.

Jeremy: It's interesting that in the discussion of the rabbinical works, and you make, you make much of this, that they can't even bring themselves to use the word pig. That seems like kind of magical thinking of a sort.

Jordan: It is. But also, you know, there's ... People do this with all sorts of things. You know, I grew up ... Many family members didn't want to mention the word cancer. Right. Because they just, just the fear of it, right, made them afraid to say it. So it works two ways. One is it's a cultural way of expressing how concerned you are about a thing, but also the more you avoid it, right? I mean, this is like basic trauma therapy, right? Like, you know, the idea of exposure therapy is to ... If you're avoiding something, it's ... you're making it worse. But learning to to deal with it and grapple with it is a way of overcoming it. Right. So the more ... That's another argument to make is, the more they linguistically avoid it, the greater power they're giving it. So that's another way it feeds into it. So it's one thing to say, oh, the pig is disgusting. It's another thing to not even be willing to say, you know, that thing is disgusting. You've distanced yourself. You've made it, you're you're making an even bigger deal out of it. And then as each subsequent generation hears that it's farther and farther away from something that they're willing to connect to, right? That's pushing it more.

Jeremy: Did any group of Jews take to the pig in late medieval times?

Jordan: Well, throughout history, one of my first points that I really try to make throughout this book, that I feel I need to constantly remind people of, is: we should never, from biblical times to today, presume that all people who identified as Jews did not eat the pig. Some did not. Some did. Some occasionally did. Some didn't ask questions. Right. So the first thing I'm always trying to undermine is this idea that that everyone throughout all time and space didn't. Right then, there are pockets of times where people talk more about actually doing that, but I talk about the followers of Sabbatai Zevi, this Messianic figure, in modernity, who had a series of practices where actually they were trying to invert rituals. And so they, they would eat pig on the Sabbath as part of their rituals, right, to purposely violate Judaism in a Jewish way. I talk about in the 20s and 30s, 1920s and 30s, Jewish communists in Russia trying to show ... Like if religion is the opiate of the masses, you want to show that you've thrown off your

religion and you're Jewish. So what better way to do that than to engage in collective farming like a good communist of pigs? But the ironic thing, right, is to show how not Jewish you are, you've chosen something that continuously reminds everyone that you're Jewish. It only works, it only is a rejection, if everyone knows that you're Jewish and choosing to do that.

Jeremy: So. So there were Jews farming pigs in the Soviet Union?

Jordan: Yes.

Jeremy: Tell me more about that.

Jordan: So again, it's the idea of how do you show ... because Jews in particular were suspect in communism at that time. And so they wanted to prove how good communists they were. And so again, the point was, if you raise pigs, you've thrown off your Judaism and embraced communism as the true cause. But in doing so, it only, it only proves that you've thrown off ... If it was someone who was a Christian or had no religion, right, and raised pigs, it's not worthy of comment. That's, you know, dog bites man. Right. But man bites dog is a Jew raising pigs. So the only way that that whole thing works is if ... It's like, if I say to you, don't think of an elephant and you have to go think, okay, I'm going to think hockey stick and your brain will say, is a hockey stick an elephant? No. Right. So but every time to make sure you're not thinking of an elephant, you have to think of an elephant. It's the same thing there. To make sure that they know that you're not Jews, pigs only work because everyone remembers. Oh, that's a Jew who's rejecting Judaism by raising pigs.

Jeremy: So he's not a Jew any more?

Jordan: But yet he is. Because you ... Because every time that it's referenced to show what a good communist is, you have to remember that he's a Jew.

Jeremy: But it doesn't stop him being the victim of Stalinist pogroms.

Jordan: No it doesn't. I mean, it's a complex and bitter irony there, but for the, for the purposes of my argument, that complex and bitter irony proves my point, right? Which is, using pig to reject Jewish identity, it is pointing back to Jewish identity.

Jeremy: It doesn't actually get you off the hook.

Jordan: Right. And the another one of the points that I try and hammer home towards the end, right, is that people ... There's this tradition to, like, look down on Jews eating pigs. And I'm indifferent to it. I'm not advocating for Jews to eat pig or to not eat pig, but what I am advocating is for people to see that, constantly, we see Jews who've chosen to not eat pig and view that as a Jewish identity statement. And Jews who have chosen to eat pig, and that ends up being, in many complex ways, also a Jewish identity statement. And so to exalt or denigrate one or the other is to miss the full picture.

Jeremy: There is a whole strand of of religious Judaism that says, yeah, it's okay, it's fine. How did that come about?

Jordan: So in the, particularly in the 1800s, you had a ... It starts in Germany, of Jews who are looking at times of the rise of the modern nation state, and they're looking at questions of emancipation, of can a Jew be a citizen? Can you be a German and a Jew, Or are you always a Jew? And is your allegiance to a separate nation. And Reform Jews said, you're first a German. You can speak good German, not Yiddish. You can engage in German society and you can go to temple and you can be a Jew, just like you can be a Lutheran or a Catholic and be German. And so what these, these Reform Jews started to say is, well, let's change the way Jewish practice is, to make it more conform with modernity as they understood it, and to fit in with that.

And one part of that was many of them rejected Jewish dietary laws, and they said, it's not rational. And that this is the rise of the claim ... For example, this is when trichinosis is discovered, and there's this claim, which is not historically true, that, oh, Jews didn't eat pig because of trichinosis. My point is always that you then have to assume the rest of the world was stupid, right? And also, as an anthropologist, Marvin Harris, has long pointed out, then the rule should be thou shalt not eat pork unless it's cooked through. Right. Because it's just, it's easy. Cook the, cook the meat more. Right. So. But they said no. So that's the rational, that's the rational explanation for this. And now that you understand it, you can eat pig. But still many Reform Jews were uncomfortable with that.

And so in America, for example, for a while there was, there were Jews who would eat oysters, which are also biblically forbidden, because if you're a sea creature, you have to have fins and scales.

Oysters don't have fins and scales, therefore they're not biblically allowed. But oysters were widely available in America, or they were very popular. And they said, oh, well ... There's one reform rabbi who even referred to oysters as ocean vegetables. Just a vegetable. I love that quote. It's fun. But they didn't eat pig because there was such cultural baggage. And then eventually in the later 1800s, American Reform Judaism said, you know what? Even pig, we're going to eat, right? Now that, if you study Reform Judaism moves on, has gotten more complicated. Some Reform Jews continue that policy. Some do not. But again, they're engaging with to what extent they're understanding Judaism, interacting with what they understand to be the modern world and modern values, and trying to, to, to fit in multiple allegiances in their minds.

Jeremy: There's another kind of strange paradox among American Jews and and pigs. I mean, Chinese food is replete with pork, and Chinese love pork. They eat lots of pork. And many Jews like Chinese food. And they don't see any ... Even even kosher Jews eat Chinese food. So, what's behind the Jewish embrace of Chinese food?

Jordan: So you can still see it today. If you go to the Lower East Side. You go to Chinatown in New York City, and you look around and you'll see shops with the Chinese characters on the window. And then if you look, you'll find some older shops that have Yiddish characters on the windows. So first is just, if you look at immigration patterns, particularly in New York, Jewish and Chinese communities butted up against each other. Right. I'm relying on several other scholars who've worked on this, who pointed out that, that there are several factors at play. One is the historical fact of just literally being next to each other. Right? Like, you're not going to learn about a food if you don't interact with that food. Then if you look at other communities that near, there were Irish, Italian, etc. and if you think, there's ... there's cultural baggage attached to that. So they'll see Christian, Christian iconography, they'll see a crucifix, for example. Right. And they have a long history of that. But if they see a statue of the Buddha, right, there's not necessarily the same baggage associated with that, even though, there's religious symbolism and such. Your average Jew on the street at that moment could choose to not ask questions about Buddha, but certainly knew what the crucifix represented.

Jordan: Then you have the fact that today people think of Chinese food as, not necessarily as cosmopolitan. Right. And because they know the difference between, you know, moo shu and lo mein and, you know, chow mein, but 100 years ago or more that that difference wasn't so well known. Right. And so someone could go into a Chinese restaurant and just point at something and order it. And if you, if you take a moment to look at most Chinese food, you're going to notice a few things. Number one, according to rabbinic law, you cannot mix milk and meat. There's no milk in most Chinese food. You're not going to. ... So even if you're, even if you don't keep kosher, but you grew up with that, you're not used to it. So number one, someone goes in is not going to have to worry about milk and meat. Then, most meat is shredded or chopped or minced in some way. And if you don't ask questions, right, if you say, I'll have some of that moo shu, don't tell me what meat's in it. I don't want to know if it's moo shu chicken, moo shu pork, right, moo shu tofu. Just give it to me. Right? Then you can choose to be ignorant of what it is, right? It's different than ordering a pork chop where you know what it is. And then, frankly, the thing that I think really is important to remember too, is it kind of once someone starts to do it, it kind of becomes a tradition, right? And so if parents start to do it and they bring their kids, the kids just associate it with ... It's a thing to do. And actually, if you look at the history of Chinese food in America, as Jews start to move out of cities into suburbs, Chinese restaurants will often follow those patterns, because there are ... If you, if they were looking to venture out into new territory, if there were Jews who would move from the city, you're going to have a clientele to start off with who are familiar with food, right. And that, and so, if you look at the — and there are many scholars who have done that, who look at the rise of Chinese food in America — that's part of that story, too. And you can't actually tell the history of Chinese food in America without talking about this Jewish connection.

Jeremy: The other thing that's kind of vaguely familiar to me is this idea that Jewish soldiers, Jewish GIs, if they didn't want to eat pork, would go hungry during during the war, the Second World War. Was that was that something that they embraced or was it always a problem?

Jordan: Again, there's not a consistent picture. For some, they said, you know what, I'm fighting war, I'm, you know, fighting Nazis. I need to eat food so I can survive, and remember there's long rabbinic

precedent for it. There's also, in modernity, lots of rabbinic precedent for, if you're in an army, violating kosher laws while you're in the army, because in theory, your life is in danger at any moment. So some just embraced it. Some ate pork before and so just continued to. Some avoided as much as possible. And yeah, some, didn't. And, and they would go hungry and, and because for them, eating pig represented such a violation that even though there were allowances and even those interpretations that we're choosing to exclude the most possible, they, they ... Even though there are allowances, they chose not to because for them it represented so much more.

Jeremy: Have the rabbis ... I mean, it's interesting that the rabbis can decide, for example, that oysters are an ocean vegetable. Have they kept up with modern trends and ... What are they, what do they say about Impossible Meat?

Jordan: Oh, yeah. So Impossible. I'll start to say, by the way, the ocean vegetables of oysters was a very small minority opinion. It's one that I love because it's so funny. But there were ... But that should not be viewed as the normative opinion.

Jeremy: Point taken.

Jordan: But Impossible ... So the question is Impossible Pork, right? So now we have ways of making completely vegetarian and vegan fake meat products. And if you look at rabbinic sources going back to the Talmud and before, there are clear understandings that, that if ... pork is forbidden, but something that tastes or looks like pork but isn't pork, it's totally fine. And then you start to have ... And there's over a hundred year history in America of, like, fake pork products. — Beef fry. Bacos, et cetera — that ended up being certified as kosher. And along comes Impossible Meats, and they were certified as kosher. Their Impossible Sausage, Impossible Beef, Impossible Hot Dogs ... You're going to have a whole list. And then they came out with the Impossible Pork, and it seemed just to go too far. But the machinery it's made on, the ingredients, et cetera. are all the same that continue to be certified kosher with other Impossible products. But just the fact that it was pork, that it was called pork, was the reason that the kosher certifying agency involved in it, the OU, which is the world's largest kosher certifier, because it's, it was deemed so pork like, they just won't do it even though every technical reason it's kosher, but they won't give their certification because of this baggage, right? So

there's more to the story there. And I mean, when this first came out, when the story first hit the news, I was like, oh, I don't want to talk about this. But then the more I read about it, the more I'm like, I have to talk about it because it proves my point, which is, there's no legal reason to deny it. It really is that cultural power of it which exerts such a force that they said, even if it's legally allowed, just the thought of it just seems so anathema that we can't do it.

And here is Jordan Rosenblum's favorite Jewish pork joke.

I probably have to go with the standard. A rabbi has always wanted to eat pig, and so what he does is he goes three towns over, puts on a disguise, and he orders the full-on pig. And he's waiting. He's waiting. And just before they bring it out of the, the kitchen, some congregants walk in and they ... And even through his disguise, they recognize him. They walk over and say hello, Rabbi. And just as they say that, out from the kitchen comes a waiter with a silver platter with a full hog with an apple in its mouth. And they put it down on the table, and they walk away. And the congregants, their mouths hit the floor, and they say, Rabbi, you ordered the pig? And he collects himself. And he says, I cannot believe this restaurant. I ordered an apple, and this is how they serve it to me.

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