Falafel in pita bread, dripping with tahini sauce, vegetables, and pickles—here is a messy, economically overflowing image of the Israeli nation.

Food products sometimes become symbols of national identity. Rice has linked identity to the land and history of Japan, while wine, according to Roland Barthes, is a sign of “Frenchness,” “part of the nation,” and employed by the French to distinguish themselves from others. So intimately is rice joined to Japan and wine to France that it is difficult to excavate the historical origins of these associations.

In the case of Jewish nationalism, a connection between the people and a common land and history had to be created artificially. Food was one of several cultural products that were used by the Israeli nationalist movement to establish and enhance the ties that would bond the Jewish people to the land of Israel. Because Israel became a nation quite recently and under accelerated circumstances, the Israeli experience provides a unique model for examining the manipulation of food products as instruments in nation-building.

What distinguishes the case of falafel from those of rice and wine is our access to its historical origins. Falafel was not assimilated into Israeli society by a long, slow, natural process. Rather, its transformation into an icon of Israeli culture was rushed and deliberate. In its urgent search for symbols of unity, the nationalist movement hit upon falafel as a signifier of Israeli pride.

Falafel is generally made from fava beans (as in Egypt, where it is also known as Ta’amia), from chickpeas (the version traditional to Palestine and encountered in Israel today), or from a combination of the two. The dried legumes are soaked in water, ground, mixed with spices, shaped into small balls, and deep-fried. Falafel’s origins have been traced to the Christian Copts of Egypt, who were not allowed to eat meat during certain holidays, especially Lent. Ta’amia thus served as a meat substitute. When the dish later spread to other regions of the Middle East, the fava beans were sometimes replaced with chickpeas, the Jewish population in Palestine—the early halutzim, or pioneers—adopted the local Arab version made with chickpeas. By the 1920s falafel had become a popular snack with the younger generation, and by the 1950s it was common throughout Israeli society. Ultimately, falafel became one of the icons of Israeli culture.

In her study of the bagel in the United States, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has outlined a series of stages the bagel passed through on its way to becoming the popular American food it is today. The same stages are useful to illuminate the transformation of falafel’s status in Israeli society. In the first stage, which Kirshenblatt-Gimblett terms “self-evident,” the product is taken for granted. The position of falafel in the everyday Arab diet was certainly “self-evident.” The second stage, termed “self-conscious,” is an accurate description of how early Jewish immigrants adopted certain local Arab cultural practices in a deliberate attempt to relinquish Diaspora habits in favor of a new existence in Palestine. The halutzim of the Second and Third Aliya (Jewish immigration to Israel) chose to adopt certain Arab models that they perceived as related to Jewish existence in the mythical, Biblical past. Here the ambivalent Zionist attitude toward the local Arab population comes to the fore: The Arabs were seen as models of behavior, on the one hand, and on the other, as primitive and in need of Jewish acculturation and modernization. As a street food, not a creation of a sophisticated cuisine, falafel was more readily accepted by the Jewish community in Palestine at a time when home cooking was seen as part of the bourgeois existence the halutzim had left behind in Europe. Other developments also contributed to its acceptance, such as the gradual marginalization of the kitchen and subsumption of the nuclear family within the community, as most clearly manifested in the Kibbutz system. Yet even when food and the traditional family structure were reintegrated into the national project, the earlier ideals of productivity and efficiency remained. As a quick, no-frills, affordable, and satisfying dish, falafel accorded with these ideals. It was seen as a functional food, not an indulgent one.

Most falafel was consumed at falafel stands. Even so, practically every cookbook published in Israel up to the 1970s included a recipe for it. As a high-protein, vegetarian food, falafel fit the agenda that had been promoted by women’s organizations since the late 1920s to reduce meat consumption.
and consume more local dairy products and legumes (although the fact that falafel is deep-fried somewhat diminished its appeal). One of the earliest recipes appeared in 1940 in the leading daily newspaper, Ha-Aretz. In response to a question by one of the readers, “How is falafel made?” the anonymous writer offered the following recipe:

Cook the legumes (dried peas, lubia [fava beans], or another type), grind, mix with oil (preferably sesame) until thickened, add plenty of crushed red pepper and salt (you can also add fresh green pepper while grinding and add other minced vegetables at the end). Make small balls from the mixture and deep fry in boiling oil until yellow-brown. You could also make an easier version with pea-flour (if available) mixed with water until thick or cooked in water with a pinch of baking soda and finished as above.5

This recipe differs from all subsequent versions in its flexible attitude toward the main ingredient (not specifying chickpeas at all), the suggestion to include fresh minced vegetables, the use of oil in the mixture, and the absence of any of the traditional spices (coriander, cumin).

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s third stage in the cultural assimilation of food is “estrangement.” For falafel this process began with the campaign for the purchase of totzeret ha-aretz (local products) and its insistence on Jewish labor.6 The orange, which preceded falafel as an Israeli culinary icon, was seen as a symbol of the success of Jewish agriculture in Palestine (the cultivation of oranges had formerly been controlled by Arab labor). By “estranging” the orange from its Arab past, the Zionists were able to adopt it as their own, while presenting Palestine as empty and desolate before their arrival. The insistence on Jewish labor as an essential part of the campaign helped the early halutzim to see themselves not as colonizers, but as redeemers of the land. But the orange could symbolize the Zionist project only after it had been detached from its early ties with the Arab population. As the importance of agriculture diminished and the demographics of the Jewish population changed—following Israel’s independence in 1948, a much larger percentage of non-European immigrants began to arrive—falafel underwent an evolution similar to that of the orange and, in many ways, took its place. Since falafel could now be linked to Jewish immigrants who had come from the Middle East and Africa, it could shed its Arab association in favor of an overarching Israeli identification. Furthermore, these newer immigrants did not share the Eastern European aversion to Diaspora culture and so could maintain certain elements of their own culture in Israel.

After independence, as the economic situation worsened and the percentage of immigrants from Middle Eastern and North African countries grew, falafel became even more popular. The zena (rationing) regime, instituted by the Israeli government in 1949, restricted the consumption of meat and other products, thereby contributing to falafel’s increasing favor in Israeli society as an affordable source of protein. Moreover, falafel was cheap, satisfying, and flavorful. During the 1950s, greater exposure to a variety of ethnic influences through such institutions as the Israeli army and the school system further increased the popularity of non-European foodstuffs. A cookbook first issued in 1948 by the Women’s International Zionist Organization, Sefer ha-Bishul (The Cookbook), does not include a recipe for falafel, but its 1956 edition, entitled Kakh Nevashel (Thus Shall We Cook), does. Here falafel appears under the subheading “Oriental Dishes” (in a new chapter, “Others,” which also includes recipes for avocado and mushrooms). The recipe calls for soaking chickpeas overnight in water with a pinch of baking soda, grinding them twice with water-soaked bread, garlic, and parsley, and adding salt, red pepper (cayenne), coriander, and cumin; the addition of an egg is optional. Finally, small balls are formed from the mixture and deep-fried.7 In 1960, Lilian Cornfeld, one of the most popular and influential cookbook writers in Israel at the time, included a recipe for falafel in her cookbook’s section on legumes, moving the dish closer to the mainstream of the Israeli diet. Falafel does not merit its own entry in Cornfeld’s index, though, appearing only among other “oriental dishes.” The recipe itself is similar to the one in Kakh Nevashel, but it eliminates the soaked bread in favor of a teaspoon each of flour and baking soda added to the mixture. Cornfeld also suggests serving falafel as the falafel stands do—in pita-bread, with vegetable salad and tahini or accompanied by French fries.8 More
modern cookbooks forego the “oriental dishes” category altogether and generally call for the addition of minced onions and fresh parsley and/or cilantro to the falafel mixture. Recent recipes also eliminate the bread or flour.

Falafel’s growing fame was reflected in its appearance as the subject of popular songs, such as Y. Zukerman’s 1949 “Falafel”:

I had for a long while a dangerous ulcer
diet and remedies did nothing to help
what need for medicine
I have a kind of cure better than penicillin

Chorus:
Falafel, falafel,
fresh, hot and aromatic
honestly you should taste it
Falafel, falafel
spicy and blood-boiling
burning—fires of hell.
What flavor!
Everyone devours.
And again!
Salt and pepper.
Falafel, falafel
old man shouts and young boy too
this is one spicy falafel.

Shlomit has a baby,
he has grown some teeth already
chatters constantly
Shlomit tells him:
‘Say Mommy to me!’
But the boy cries instead:

Falafel, falafel…

I have a girl
this is what she told me:
‘Know I have two loves’
and jealous then I asked her ‘who?’
‘One is you—the other’s name is’

Falafel, falafel…

This song encouraged anyone unfamiliar with falafel to try it. By the late 1950s, however, such encouragement was unnecessary. A song by Dan Almagor called “Ve-Lanu Yesh Falafel” (“And We Have Falafel”) demonstrates that by 1958, the Israeli embrace of falafel was complete. As falafel began to achieve the status of a national snack, it also began to acquire some less desirable connotations. A 1955 caricature reveals that falafel stands were notorious for health violations.

Following the 1948 War of Independence, Arabs began to be portrayed as the enemy, and Arab cultural products acquired negative associations. This process affected falafel, which was distanced from its roots in local Arab cuisine and attributed to Jewish immigrants from Yemen. Running falafel stands had been popular with Yemenite immigrants to Palestine as early as the 1920s and ’30s. Beyond Milk and Honey, a collection of recipes distributed by the Israeli Embassy in Washington, attributes falafel’s popularity in Israel to Yemenite immigrants and makes no mention of its Arab roots.10 However, contrary to what many Israelis believe, falafel is not native to Yemen; the Yemenites had learned how to prepare it from the local Arabs.11 The detachment of falafel from its Arab origins allowed it to reach the next stage in its assimilation, “authentic.” At this stage, the food is no longer taken for granted; the best versions are searched out and held up as prized products. By the late 1960s falafel had become “nationalized” into Israeli culture and cuisine to the point where it could be used with pride as a symbol of “Israeliness.” As Israel devoted greater effort in the 1960s toward establishing images of a united nation, the “Jewish State” fell back on certain elements from Jewish tradition. In the realm of food this meant that all national ventures, from the army to El-Al Airline to state dinners, served kosher food. Falafel had an advantage in its status as a parve food (neither meat nor dairy), which gave it flexibility in kosher menus. Thus, despite its original low status as a street food, falafel slowly gained entry into formal menus representing the State of Israel. When Chef Uri Guttman prepared the Annual Dinner of the German Gastronomic Academy in 1998 with dishes native to his home country of Israel, he chose to begin the eight-course meal with an appetizer of humus and tahini with a single falafel ball, pine nuts, and a drop of oil served on a spoon.12

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s final stage, that of “naturalization,” occurs when the product becomes common, part of everyday life. There is no question that falafel in Israel has achieved this final stage. It can be found everywhere from ready-made supermarket mixes to modern fast-food chains, and it is consumed at all levels of Israeli society. During the 1970s and ’80s, partly because of health risks (rumors regarding the use of engine oil in frying circulated for a while13) and partly because of competition from other fast-food
products like pizza and hamburgers, falafel’s popularity seemed to decline, but it never disappeared from the Israeli diet. In the past few years its popularity has surged, as new falafel chains offer a clean, modern environment. There are also new variations, such as the red-pepper or sweet-potato falafel offered at Tel Aviv’s Malkot ha-Falafel (Falafel Queens), which opened in 1998. One of the owners of Malkot ha-Falafel, Ella Shein, justified her falafel variations to the critics by saying that falafel is “not originally Israeli”; it was always influenced by a variety of sources and is a product of integration.

Outside of Israel falafel retains its status as a marker for the Israeli nation and Jewish nationalism. Several Jewish friends in New York have told me that falafel and humus have taken over as the popular offerings at Jewish social gatherings. Since falafel’s origins are Arabic, it is not directly associated with a single community in the Diaspora; since the entire Jewish population in Israel has adopted it, falafel is the perfect symbol for a proud, new, ethnically mixed Jewish nation. By replacing bagels or pastrami with falafel, the Jewish community in New York displays its affiliation with Israel, its connection to the Jewish State, and its inclusion in the Jewish nation. So perhaps falafel has not lost its cachet as an emblem of Israeli identity.

As national icons, wine in France and rice in Japan seem to resonate with the people who consume them, but Israelis seem somewhat ambivalent toward falafel. Although it is a very popular snack, falafel appears to be most powerful as a symbol for outsiders (such as Jews living abroad or tourists), rather than for the people of Israel. Hanokh Levin, who was one of Israel’s most prominent playwrights, wrote a short story describing a very unfortunate blind date. In an effort to salvage something from the evening, the woman tries to get the man to buy her dinner, but the man wants to spend as little money as possible. So they end up at a falafel stand. Levin describes their meal:

Ishel and Romanechka are standing […] each one holding a pita stuffed with fiery falafel balls, stale salad, and runny tahini sauce, their bodies leaning slightly forward like animals at a trough so as not to stain their clothes with dripping tahini […] Neither one likes falafel, they are swallowing it listlessly, Ishel forcing himself to pretend to be avidly eating […] and Romanechka pouring all her fury and resentment out onto the falafel, and so to an observer it would seem as if two hedonists were drawing the utmost pleasure from the cheap Yemenite dish that has become—alas—our national emblem.

Falafel is often presented as a proud national symbol on postcards, tourist publications, and at meals served abroad. However, it appears to serve more as a representation of Israel to the outside world than as an evocative and inspiring image for Israelis.

A photograph of falafel balls in pita bread adorned with a prominent Israeli flag, positioned as if to signify Israel’s dominion over this particular falafel landscape, is displayed on postcards, as well as on the cover of a small cookbook.
sold in tourist shops, called *The Melting Pot: A Quick and Easy Blend of Israeli Cuisine*. The same company, Palphot Ltd., published both the postcard and the book. The cookbook is written in English, and its cover image seems to be an extremely nationalistic representation of falafel. Oddly enough, Palphot also published a book titled *A Taste of Egypt: Quick and Easy Egyptian Recipes*, which features on its cover the very same image with one small change: the Israeli flag has been replaced by an Egyptian one. The Israeli publisher apparently had no problem “sharing” this national icon with Egypt, the country regarded as the originator of falafel, but actual Egyptian publications do not appear to regard falafel in the same manner. It might be a popular street food, but it is too lowly to be featured as a national emblem.

Over the years, Palestinians have criticized Israelis for appropriating falafel and making it their own. Daniel Bar-Tal, a friend, told me about a conference he participated in several years ago, at which an Israeli woman was trying to break up an argument between the Palestinian and Israeli participants. “Why are we arguing?” she asked. “We have so much in common! Even our food, falafel for example…” to which an outraged Palestinian woman objected, “You stole everything else from us, now you want to steal falafel, too?” A recent article in the *New York Times* focused on the tension between Palestinians and Israelis surrounding falafel; it presented a range of opinions on both sides regarding falafel’s “ownership.” From the article it appears that today most Israelis acknowledge falafel’s Arab origins, while some Palestinians concede that falafel is a regional food and is therefore not “owned” by any one nation. Because foods and eating habits are often products of cultural and commercial exchange as well as mutual influences, tracing their origins can be problematic. Falafel became a particularly sensitive topic because of the tense political situation, and because Israelis made falafel into a symbol for the Israeli nation.

In his cookbook *A Taste of Palestine*, Aziz Shihab reports that in Jerusalem “hummus and falafel shops are filled with customers. They are no longer Arab foods.” Shihab’s observation is tinged with nostalgia, with a sense that the city of his childhood is no longer his. But the wider appeal of these foods in the global market is treated as a positive phenomenon in several modern cookbooks: “Falafel… is now part of
the global menu,” writes Anissa Helou.22 In a brief survey of Middle Eastern cookbooks, written mainly by Palestinian and Arab authors, I found that falafel is consistently described as popular throughout the Middle East: “The fast food of the Middle East, falafel has invaded restaurant menus of all categories in many parts of Europe and America.”23 Writes Christiane Dabdoub Nasser. Sonia Uvezian is more specific: “One of Egypt’s national dishes, falafel is also very popular in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, where it is avidly consumed at all times of the day.”24 Falafel’s popularity in countries other than Egypt is not perceived as a problem. Jenny Ridgwell states simply that “Falafel is popular throughout the Middle East, each country having a slightly different recipe…”25 A specific mention of Israel is conspicuously missing from all of these examples. If Israel is part of the Middle East, then its citizens have as much right as those of any other country in the region to love falafel. Israelis’ choice of falafel or hummus as markers of identity should perhaps be perceived as a reflection of their wish to become part of the Middle East. Would their motives not be more questionable had they insisted on gefilte fish or hamburger as the “national” snack?

Food is often implicated in economic and political processes; it can serve either as a tool of propaganda or as an instrument of study and greater understanding. Because of the recent events in the Middle East, even something as innocent-looking as a ground chickpea ball can be used as a weapon of sorts in a battle played out in the media and global public opinion. I admit that the history of falafel told here is a subjective one, as I have focused on falafel’s role within the Israeli national project. I maintain that the iconic power of falafel for Israelis and for the Jewish people in the Diaspora derives from its ability to serve as a common, unifying marker for a variety of factions within Israeli society. That it was adopted from the outside and does not “belong” to any particular ethnic group is, in fact, one of the reasons for its success. The history of falafel’s vicissitudes within the Israeli nation also reflects the Israeli ambivalence toward the Palestinian population. Unlike other food products (sugar, for example), falafel was never produced through the labor of a colonized population, nor was Palestinian land appropriated for the purpose of growing chickpeas for its preparation. Thus, falafel is not a tool of oppression. As considered here, the case of falafel can offer some insight into the complex nature of national icons and cultural preferences.

NOTES
This paper is adapted from a chapter in my Ph.D. dissertation, “Recipe for a Nation: Cuisine, Jewish Nationalism, and the Israeli State.” New York University, May 2002.

3. Falafel’s “history” is described by several cookbook authors, such as Joan Nathan, The Foods of Israel Today (New York: Knopf, 2001), 70–73; and Claudia Roden, A Book of Middle Eastern Food (New York: Random House, 1968), 47–48.
5. “Bishvil Akeret ha-Bayit” (“For the Housewife”), Ha-Aretz, 27 May 1940, 3.
6. Calls for purchasing local products began in the 1920s, but the heyday of this campaign took place in the 1930s with the establishment of the Union for Totzeret ha-Aretz in 1936. Variations on this theme continue to appear in Israel to this day. Recently there were calls for the purchase of “blue and white” products—the colors of the Israeli flag.
7. WIZO Instruction Department, Kakh Nevashel (Tel-Aviv: Net, 1960 [orig. pub. 1948]), 215.
9. Y. Zuckerman, “Falafel” (Tel-Aviv: Ha-Zerner, 1940). Translated by Yael Raviv. I would like to thank Eve Jochnowitz for bringing this song to my attention.
12. Interview with Uri Guttman, 10 January 1999.
15. Ella Shein, quoted in Zach, “Nuevo-Falafel.”
18. Isis Egypt, A Taste of Egypt: Quick and Easy Egyptian Recipes. There are no publication details on the book itself, bought in Lebanon, but it was traced by Dalia Carmel to Pulpbot Ltd. in Israel. I wish to thank Dalia Carmel for sharing these books with me and for all her help in my research for this piece.