

## EATING AND FOOD

The main service of God is through eating—so have I heard from my masters; and it is similar to prayer. [*Darkei Tzedek*, p. 18]

Contrary to what one might think, it is possible some times to come closer to God when you are involved in material activities like eating and drinking than when you are involved with “religious” activities like Torah study and prayer. Because when the heart opens up due to the sense of pleasure, and there is a feeling of satisfaction and happiness, then is the fit time to come close to holiness. [Abraham of Slonim, *Torat Avot*, p. 195]

As we go through our day, we eat. Our relationship to food is a basic aspect of our lives. For you who are reading this book, the ability to obtain enough food has no doubt become a given. For much of the world today, this is not true. Nor was it always true for our ancestors. Having enough to eat was a constant concern, either because of poverty or because of the whims of nature. A successful harvest, therefore, has generally been a time for rejoicing. In societies lacking our resources and our sophisticated system of food distribution, people are closely connected to the agricultural cycle whether or not they are farmers, since food is obtained locally. The success or failure of the local farmers, then, is of immediate concern to everyone living in such a community.

Our concern may be the opposite, namely, having too much food. For one thing, our society places a high value on appearance, idealizing

thin women and men, and bombarding us with images of “beautiful” people. What, when, and how we eat have become subjects of a focus on our bodies that would hardly be understood by our ancestors.

Judaism values eating, first and foremost, as an act necessary for survival. It also validates the pleasure we get from food and encourages us to enjoy food at special occasions. The tradition marks eating as a spiritual enterprise through *berakhot* or blessings. Judaism also limits what we can eat and when we can eat certain foods (through the laws of keeping kosher). Naturally, Judaism urges us to be concerned with our health and to take care of our bodies. On the other hand, while acknowledging that there are handsome and beautiful people in the world, Judaism sets no definition of beauty, nor are we encouraged to strive to be beautiful. Instead, we are encouraged to make eating, like all the mundane activities of our lives, into an act of holiness—an act that nourishes the soul as well as the body.

Let us begin our examination of eating and food at the beginning—with creation. On the sixth day, God instructed the newly created humans: “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food” (Gen. 1:29). The first thing God said to humans after “be fruitful and multiply” was that all growing things are available for human consumption. From this we learn that food is an essential part of human existence.

By saying nothing about eating animals, the Torah implies that animals were not created for human consumption. Indeed, God equates humans and animals: “And to all the animals on land, to all the birds of the sky, and to everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life, I give all the green plants for food” (Gen. 1:30). According to this initial version of the creation story, human beings and animals were apparently meant to be vegetarians.

The second chapter of Genesis, however, points to a difference between animals and human beings. It begins: “When the Lord God made earth and heavens—when no shrub of the field was yet on the earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no human to till the soil.” By implication, though no human yet existed, the verse main-

tains that human beings are intrinsic to creation. Humans would till the soil and transform the earth. Animals would eat off the land, while humans were destined, through the art of agriculture, to attempt to shape nature to their own needs.

Before the age of agriculture commenced, God planted an idyllic garden and placed Adam and Eve in it. Everything was provided. There was only one catch—the creation of the first diet plan. God commanded: “Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it, for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die” (Gen. 2:17). The rest, as we know, is history. Adam and Eve ate of the tree whose fruit (unspecified in the text, its identification as an apple is from the Middle Ages) was more likely to be chocolate cream pie or French fries than a fig or an apple. They then had the knowledge of good and evil; despite that, they wanted to eat more of what God had called evil.

Perhaps Adam and Even knew they were naked because they noticed they were gaining a little weight. Almost at once, they became concerned about whether they would still be attractive to each other. At first God wanted to let nature take its promised course: “as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.” But God had a second thought: if, whenever humans ate food that wasn’t good for them, their bodies would shut down and die, there would be no real choice, no free will, no struggle; no tree standing in the midst of the garden that contained both good and evil. So God changed the rules. From now on, there would be good *and* bad things to eat. There would also be many good things of which it would be bad to eat too much. Choices would abound. Food, eating, and bodies would never be simple again.

Cursed be the ground because of you;  
By toil shall you eat of it  
All the days of your life:  
Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you.  
But your food shall be the grasses of the field;  
By the sweat of your brow  
Shall you get bread to eat,  
Until you return to the ground—

For from it you were taken,  
For dust you are,  
And to dust you shall return. [Gen. 3:17-19]

The obtaining of food would become a struggle. Mere survival could no longer be taken for granted. However, the dynamic of the tree continues writ large. We will desire that which we cannot have or at least that which is hard to obtain. We will want food not just to survive but because we lust for what we cannot have and for what we imagine that food gives us. We will struggle to feed ourselves emotionally as well as nutritionally.

The human story continues as the Torah tells us: “The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness.” Therefore, God regretted all the creatures God had made and decided to destroy them with a flood. What was the corruption? The text is not explicit. Perhaps we can infer the answer from the laws that God promulgates after the flood. One of these states that anyone who commits murder should be executed in punishment. Therefore, some commentators conclude that the corruption that led to the flood involved murder. God also tells us: “Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these” (Gen. 9:3). No longer will animals and humans be equal. Human beings are given explicit permission to be predators: “The fear and dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky—everything with which the earth is astir—and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand” (Gen. 9:2). So, despite suffering a common fate in the flood, human beings emerge as antagonists to animals rather than as co-equals!

From the context it would seem that this concession allowing humans to eat flesh is somehow related to the lawlessness that preceded the flood. The eating of animal flesh may be a concession to the blood-lust rampant in humans. In this regard, the laws after the flood also take a number of steps to discourage murder. First, murder is established as a capital crime. Second, though humans are allowed to eat any animal, “You must not, however, eat flesh with its life-blood in it” (Gen. 9:4). As the Torah states later on: “For the life of all flesh—its

blood is its life" (Lev. 17:14). Therefore, while we are given permission to eat meat, we cannot eat its blood (or eat the limb of a living animal, which is also how this verse is understood). We are to focus on what constitutes life and death, particularly because God gives the life of other creatures into our hands. We are instructed to honor life by not consuming blood, that which represents life in animals. Thus, even as the categories of what humans can eat are expanded, so are the rules governing eating.

Lest we think that the rules apply only to the taking of the life of other creatures, the story of Noah continues immediately: "Noah, the tiller of soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent" (Gen. 9:20-21).

No life is taken to produce wine and yet wine is a potent representative of the complexity of food and drink. Wine is outstanding; both in the pleasurable feeling it can give to the drinker and to the persistent and pervasive problems it can create for those who drink too much. Through wine we are to sanctify the Sabbath day and to celebrate our weddings. We are told "No rejoicing before God is possible except with wine" (Talmud, *Pesachim* 109a). Yet the loss of self-respect in drunkenness is portrayed beginning with Noah and continuing in every Jewish teaching on food.

We have been taught that R. Meir said: The tree whose fruit Adam ate was a vine, for nothing brings as much woe to humans as wine. [Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 70a]

As wine enters each and every part of a human's body, it grows lax, and his mind is confused. Once wine enters, reason leaves. [Midrash, *Numbers Rabbah* 10:8]

When Noah began planting, Satan came by, stationed himself before him, and asked, "What are you planting?" Noah: "A vineyard." Satan: "What is its nature?" Noah: "Its fruit, whether fresh or dried, is sweet, and from it wine is made, which gladdens a person's heart."

Satan: "Would you like the two of us, me and you, to plant it together?" Noah: "Very well."

What did Satan do? He brought a ewe lamb and slaughtered it over the vine; then he brought a lion, which he likewise slaughtered over the vine; then a monkey, which he also slaughtered over the vine; and finally a pig, which he again slaughtered over the vine. And with the blood dripping from them, he watered the vineyard.

The charade was Satan's way of saying that when a person drinks one cup of wine, he acts like a ewe lamb, humble and meek. When she drinks two, she becomes as mighty as a lion and proceeds to brag extravagantly, saying, "Who is like me?" When he drinks three or four cups, he becomes like a monkey, hopping about, dancing, giggling, and uttering obscenities in public, without realizing what he is doing. Finally, when she becomes blind drunk, she is like a pig; wallowing in mire and coming to rest among refuse. [*Midrash Tanhuma, Noah* 13]

Food plays many roles in the stories of the Torah. Abraham and Sarah employ food as an expression of hospitality. Jacob uses a pot of lentils to buy the birthright from his hungry brother, Esau. Food is central to the plot of the Joseph story, for food brings Joseph to power and brings his brothers to Egypt. When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, breaking bread together is depicted as a social setting. The stories of the patriarchs are filled with feasts and famines.

Food occupies a pivotal role in the story of the Jewish people after they leave Egypt. The Israelites complain that they do not have enough to eat or drink. God sometimes provides for them and at other times is angered by their constant complaining. Near the beginning of their desert travels they are given manna from heaven. This mysterious food, provided daily by God, is meant to fill all of their food needs. Yet later on (in Num. 11), the Israelites express unhappiness despite having the manna.

The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember

the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!" . . . Then the Lord said to Moses, "The Lord will give you meat to eat and you shall eat. You shall not eat one day, nor two, not even five days or ten or twenty, but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you. For you have rejected the Lord who is among you, by whining before God and saying, 'Oh why did we ever leave Egypt!' . . ." A wind from the Lord started up, swept quail from the sea and strewed them over the camp, about a day's journey on this side and about a day's journey on that side, all around the camp, and some two cubits deep on the ground. The people set to gathering quail all that day and night and all the next day—even he who gathered least had ten *homers*. . . . The meat was still between their teeth, nor yet chewed, when the anger of the Lord blazed forth against the people and the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague. [Num. 11: 4-6, 16, 18-20, and 31-33]

Perhaps this is a tale about the confusion that comes from thinking you want one thing when really you want something else. In a fashion, God re-creates the Garden of Eden in the desert. God supplies the Israelites' needs through the manna. No hard work is required to obtain this food; no struggle with nature; no vulnerability to weather conditions. God provides manna, the perfect food, but perhaps the people want something else. They say they want food, but it seems they want love and reassurance.

God's consistent support of them in the desert through the manna is seemingly insufficient. Perhaps they know that God can withdraw love and punish them out of anger. Perhaps they are afraid of the unknown future that lies before them, or they feel overwhelmed by all the choices ahead of them as a newly freed people.

The people complain about what they have, the manna, but when they get what they want, the quails, it sickens them. Even in ancient times, food represented the twin complexities of need and want. Two themes are evoked by food and eating. The first is the issue of nourish-

ment. When we eat, we often seek nourishment that goes beyond our bodies' basic needs. Sometimes this comes in the form of physical cravings, as when we are "addicted" to particular foods. At other times eating becomes a substitute for some emotional nourishment we lack. In this case, we may equate food with love, or in moments of anxiety or loss we may eat in the hope of "feeling better."

The second issue, often related, has to do with body and appearance. Our society places an enormous emphasis on how we appear to others. At the same time, many of us have a distorted sense of our own bodies. In an experiment, women were asked to close their eyes and place their hands to show how wide they believed their hips to be. Most indicated their hips to be wider than they really were. We all know people who are not fat by any objective standard, but who think of themselves as fat and diet constantly to lose weight.

Judaism postulates that we can approach food and eating in a spiritual way.

In the midrash cited in the first chapter, the creation of human beings was compared to the striking of coins. As coins are struck, each is produced in the same image. When God creates people, each is created in God's image, yet each one is unique. This midrash is a basic affirmation of every body. No body can be more Godlike than any other. One could even say that this body is the one that has been given to me by God. In a sense, this is similar to saying that some people are overweight because of a genetic disposition, not because they cannot control their eating. For superficial features, plastic surgery can make some difference. When it comes to how tall or short you are, however, these things cannot be significantly changed at all. Thinking of your body as a gift from God is a good beginning, though clearly for those born with disabilities there are difficult burdens that accompany that gift.

Still, this gift, this body, is given into our care and—like Hillel, who considered it a *mitzvah* (precept) to bathe in the bathhouse—we are responsible for striving for a healthy body because our body is the image of God. According to some rabbinic authorities, an understanding of the verse *venishmarteim me'od l'nafshoteichem*, "for your own sake, therefore, be most careful" (Deut. 4:15), is broader than avoiding harm-

ful situations. It also implies not doing things that are clearly detrimental to our health. For these authorities, alcoholism, cigarette smoking, and overeating fall into this category.

“He who does good to his own self is a person of mercy” (Prov. 11:17), as may be inferred from what Hillel the Elder once said. After bidding farewell to his disciples, he kept walking along with them. His disciples asked him, “Master, where are you going?” He replied, “To do a good turn to a guest in my house.” They said, “Every day you seem to have a guest.” He replied, “Is not my poor soul a guest in my body—here today and tomorrow here no longer?” [Midrash, *Leviticus Rabbah* 34:4]

And whatever he eats or drinks . . . his intention will be to keep his body and limbs healthy. . . he will eat what is healthy, whether it is bitter or sweet. His practice will be to have his intention that his body be healthy and strong so his soul will be fit and able to know God. For it is not possible to understand and become wise in Torah and mitzvot when you are hungry or sickly or when one of your limbs hurts. [*Orchot Tzaddikim*, Gate 5, p. 39]

The impulse that we have to nourish ourselves through food is a good one, reflecting God’s desire that we feel cherished. (Thanks to Joyce Krensky for this insight.) Thus we see food equals love not because we are sick but because it reflects a measure of truth. There is an emotional quality to eating. Food gives pleasure. (By the same token, hunger is also a gift from God, for it promotes self-preservation and impels us to action.)

In the world-to-come a person will be asked to give an account for that which, being excellent to eat, she gazed at and did not eat. [Jerusalem Talmud, *Kiddushin*, end]

[You should realize that] God created the food that is before you, and God gives it its existence and puts within it its taste and nourish-

ing qualities. And God gives to a person the desire to eat and also his sense of taste, whereby the food tastes good. [*Menorat Zahav*]

Food, however, cannot replace love. There may be an uncontrolled desire to attain through food that which it cannot ultimately provide. Clearly, then, a healthy approach to eating is rooted in a healthy body and a healthy psyche. Thus eating can be transformed into a spiritual exercise.

A healthy/spiritual approach to food is rooted in three areas of traditional teachings: *berakhot*, “blessings”; *kashrut*, “dietary laws”; and *seudah*, “food as celebration and pleasure.” Taken together, they make the everyday act of eating an essential part of a spiritual path.

### *Berakhot*

The rabbis created the basic liturgical formula of the *berakhah*, the “blessing,” from the Great Assembly. Its standard wording is: *Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam . . .*, “Praised are You Eternal our God source of the universe . . .,” followed by a specific attribute, “who created the fruit of trees” or “who brought forth bread from the earth.” There are many specific *berakhot*, but they all begin with this formula. A *berakhah* is to be said before partaking of food. There are *berakhot* for fruit, vegetables, bread, cake, wine, and a catchall formulation for everything else. Saying a *berakhah* is meant to bring us to awareness. For the rabbis, the first level is awareness of God.

Our rabbis have taught: It is forbidden for a person to enjoy anything of this world without a *berakhah*. . . R. Levi contrasted two texts. It is written, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 24:1) and it is also written, “The heavens are the heavens of God, but the earth God has given to human beings!” (Psalm 115:16). There is no contradiction: in the one case it is before a blessing has been said, in the other case after. [Talmud, *Berakhot* 35a]

The rabbis begin with a notion that God as creator has made this world and all that it contains. Whoever eats without saying a blessing is

like someone who robs from the Holy One. This notion conveys an important statement about God and about humans. Despite all our strivings, our sustenance is only partly the result of our own endeavor. Ultimately everything comes from God. We are little more than tenant farmers on this planet. Our spiritual awareness begins when we sense that we have received this gift from the Creator of all life.

The *berakhah* before eating brings us another awareness, too. The act of eating is meant to be one of pleasure and enjoyment. We should savor our food rather than just devour it. The Baal Shem Tov taught: "When you eat and take pleasure in the taste and sweetness of the food, bear in mind that it is God who has placed into the food its taste and sweetness. You will, then, truly serve God by your eating." On this level, we should make ourselves aware of the pleasurable nature of eating.

We should likewise be aware of food as a necessary source of health and sustenance. Without food we could not live—this is a fact that we may easily take for granted. The Rebbe of Mikolayeve taught:

Eat and drink because you are commanded to safeguard your health, as it is said: "For your *own* sake, therefore be most careful" (Deut. 4:15). Such eating is a pious deed. But to eat merely to satisfy a craving is a form of transgression. [Louis Newman, *Hasidic Anthology*, p. 86]

This also brings to awareness the fact that there are many people in this world who cannot take their next meal for granted. They suffer not a lack of awareness, only a lack of food. In the past, the tradition encouraged us to share our meals with the poor. In an immediate sense, this is not often practical today. We could, however, accept the suggestion of the Reshit Hochmah:

In a place where poor people are not to be found, what can a person do . . . ? It is possible to say that you should estimate what the cost of the meal for a poor person would have been, and put that amount aside for charity before you eat. [*Sh'ar ha-Kedushah* 15:64]

All in all, the spiritual awareness of the meaning of food that is contained in the *berakhah* enables us to nourish our souls as we nourish our bodies.

The essential advice on how to deal with food lust is that when you eat you should be aware of what you are doing; then it ceases to be just an animal action. The lust for food is intact if you allow your mind and all your senses to be immersed in eating until you forget what you are doing. Then eating is like an animal's action. [*Emunat Tzadikkim*, p. 78]

Eating is intended to be a purposeful act. While animals eat out of instinct, we eat out of awareness of all that the act of eating entails. We are to remember all that brought this food to the plate. The Jerusalem Talmud (*Hallah* 1) says: "Before you eat your piece of bread, remember that ten *mitzvot* [commandments] have been performed in preparing it for your consumption: it was not sown on Shabbat or the Sabbatical year; it was not plowed then either; the ox's mouth was not tied while he worked in the field; the grower has not gathered the left-over and forgotten sheaves; he has not reaped the corners of his fields; he has given the tithes to the priest and Levite; he has given the second tithe and the tithe to the poor; and his wife separated a piece of dough for the priest."

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#### KAVANAH

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi offers a contemporary *kavanah*:

When you eat your bowl of corn flakes, devote at least a few seconds to "seeing" the corn—how it grows, with the tassels hanging down; and how the wind sweeps across the cornfield, blowing pollen from one side to the other and making the plants fertile. When you watch this in your imagination, and carry the process from the planted seed up to the present moment in which you are chewing the corn flakes, you see how your eating is connected with the whole fertility dance of the plant world. If we

don't become a conscious part of the process, what right have we to eat the corn flakes?

That sense of being part of the universe rather than being apart from it leads to one final level of awareness.

The Baal Shem Tov taught: When you take a fruit or any other food in your hand and recite the blessing "Praised are You, O God" with intention, your mentioning the holy name awakens the spark of divine life by which the fruit was originally created. Everything was created by the power of the holy name. Since an element is awakened when it comes into contact with a similar element, the blessing awakens the element of divine life in the fruit, the element that is the food of the soul. This applies to all the permitted and kosher foods, since God commanded us to uplift them from a material existence to a spiritual existence. [*Keter Shem Tov*, p. 43]

The will of the Creator, then, is to "enliven every living thing" by means of eating. So I have to eat in holiness and purity, for I am doing God's will by eating. And when you think this way, then you can accomplish the spiritual purpose of eating by lifting up the holy sparks to their source. . . . And you should realize that it is God who has brought you to this hunger and thirst. For the hunger is from God. [*Mazkeret Shem ha-Gedolim*, p. 79]

If sparks of holiness are found everywhere in the world and we are to work toward restoring the wholeness of the divine, then the act of eating becomes in and of itself a holy act. By eating with this level of consciousness we are helping in the process of *tikkun*, "repairing" the world. We can transform hunger and thirst into a hunger and thirst for the experience of the holy.

There are different *berakhot* for the various categories of food and drink.

*Over bread and meals Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam ha-motzi lehem min ha-aretz.* "Praised are You, Eternal One

our God, source of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth."

From time immemorial, bread was the central food of meals. Meals would begin with the "breaking" of bread and the recital of this blessing. The blessing over bread, the *motzi*, therefore represents all foods eaten at a meal, so no other blessings are necessary.

*Over fruit Barukh . . . ha-olam borei peri ha-etz.* "Praised . . . of the universe, who creates the fruit of the trees."

*Over vegetables Barukh . . . ha-olam borei peri ha-adamah.* "Praised . . . of the universe, who creates the fruit of the earth."

*Over wine or grapes Barukh . . . ha-olam borei peri ha-gafen.* "Praised . . . of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine."

Apparently, because of wine's ritual use, it requires its own *berakhab*. The grape is also an exception to the *berakhab* for fruit.

*Over cake Barukh . . . ha-olam borei minai mezonot.* "Praised . . . of the universe, who creates various kinds of food."

*Over other foods, such as cheese or meat Barukh . . . ha-olam she-hakol nihyeh bidvoro.* "Praised . . . of the universe, by whose word all things come into being."

While it is customary to use these traditional *berakhot*, the issue of nontraditional liturgy has been debated since the time of the Talmud.

R. Meir said: Even if one merely sees a loaf of bread and says, "Blessed be the One who created this bread; how beautiful is this bread!"—that is the same as a blessing over it. But R. Yose said: A person who changes the formula the sages have fixed for blessings has not discharged her or his duty. [*Tosefta, Berakhot 4:4-5*]

For those who struggle with the traditional language for its use of gender in referring to God or because of its notions of a transcendent

God, a groundbreaking work is *The Book of Blessings*, by Marcia Falk (Harper San Francisco, 1996).

While we have focused on the *berakhot* before eating that encourage us to eat with awareness, there are also *berakhot* to be recited after eating.

1. *Birkat ha-mazon*, the Grace after Meals, consists of four long *berakhot* as well as additional liturgy. It is recited after meals, traditionally after any bread is eaten. Because it is lengthy, a number of abridged versions and short contemporary alternatives exist.

2. *Al ha-mibyah*, which is an abridged form of the themes of *birkat ha-mazon* recited after eating cake, wine, or fruits associated with the land of Israel, e.g., grapes, figs, dates, olives, and pomegranates (see Deut. 8:8).

3. *Borei nefashot*, literally, “who creates living beings.” This blessing is recited over all food not covered above. It is also used if you don’t have the text for the above blessings. This blessing, like its longer cousins, expresses gratitude for the sustenance just received from God.

*Barukh . . . ha-olam borei nefashot rabot ve-hesronan al kol mah shebara le-hayyot bahem nefesh kol hai barukh hai ha-olamim.* “Praised . . . of the universe, who creates innumerable living beings and all that they need to sustain each and every life. Praised is the One who is the Life of the universe.”

*Berakhot* as pointers to spiritual awareness exist in other forms in the tradition. (In their long form, they are also a basic component of Jewish liturgy. See “*Avodah: The Path of Prayer*,” pp. 176–205). As we noted above, they are a prelude to whatever *mitzvah* they describe. They serve to call our attention to the act that we are about to perform. One category of *berakhot*, including washing the hands in the morning, lighting Sabbath candles, and so on, is known as *birkhot ha-mitzvah*, “blessings recited before performing a commandment.” Another category is *birkhot ha-nehenin*, “blessings related to the enjoyment of our senses.” In addition to the blessings related to eating and taste, there are also blessings for smell, sight, sound, and touch. There are blessings for smelling fragrant spices or seeing a rainbow or hearing

thunder or putting on a new piece of clothing. All of these blessings are to remind us not to take the simple wonders of life for granted.

Since awareness comes not only through our five senses, but also from what we encounter in the events of our lives, the blessing *sheheheyanu* is recited when we do something for the first time or when we participate in special occasions. A new home, a new fruit, a first-time reading from the Torah, are all occasions for this blessing. It reads:

*Barukh . . . ha-olam sheheheyanu ve-kimanu ve-higiyanu lazman hazeh.* “Praised . . . of the universe who has kept us alive and sustained us and enabled us to reach this moment.”

There are even *berakhot* to be recited upon hearing news. *Ha-tov u-mativ*, “who is good and does good,” is said upon hearing glad tidings. *Dayan ha-emet*, “the true Judge,” is said when hearing bad news, including the news of a death. As creator of the universe, God creates both the beautiful sunset and the devastating earthquake. Being aware of the holy does not mean that we miraculously escape the horrendous. Being aware means being conscious of everything that life holds in store. Being aware of God means being aware of the One “who forms light and darkness, establishes peace and creates destruction” (Isa. 45:7).

### *Kashrut*

*Kashrut* refers to the laws and customs regulating which foods and under what circumstances permitted foods may be consumed according to the Jewish tradition. The original source for these laws is found in the Torah, for example in Leviticus 11. The Torah tells us which categories of food are permitted and which are prohibited. The tradition also tells us how animals should be slaughtered and prohibits the eating of milk and meat together.

In summary: All vegetables and fruit are kosher and have no restrictions upon their consumption. There are permitted and forbidden animals, birds, and fish. Cow, sheep, goat, chicken, turkey, and fish with fins and scales are kosher. Pig, birds of prey, lobster, shrimp, and crab are not kosher. Also reptiles, insects, and creepy-crawly things in gen-



eral are not kosher. To be kosher, permitted animals (not including fish) must be slaughtered in a ritual way. The additional prohibition of eating milk and meat together prohibits not only cheeseburgers but also even eating milk and meat foods at the same meal. Around these basic rules, many other customs and restrictions have developed that serve to help prevent our violating these rules accidentally.

Many questions surround this ancient system of food rules. While *kashrut* is clearly intended to regulate our eating, the logic behind the system is hardly apparent. Unlike vegetarianism, the permitted and forbidden foods of *kashrut* seem almost arbitrary. Today, some Jews observe *kashrut* simply because they believe God commanded it. Others follow these laws because this is the way the Jewish people have eaten for hundreds of years. Yet the question remains—what is the purpose of these laws?

The Torah does give us an answer to that question in Lev. 11:44: “For I the Lord am your God: you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy.” Thus *kashrut* involves holiness. Through *kashrut*, we are to be holy just as God is holy. *Kadosh* is the biblical word for “holy.” In ancient Israel, *kadosh*, “holiness,” was a term that was applied to God. Departing from other ancient Middle Eastern civilizations, the Torah teaches that nothing in this world is intrinsically holy. There are no sacred trees or rivers. Only God is holy. All other holiness is derived from God or is ascribed by God to some thing.

The source of holiness is assigned to God alone. Holiness is the extension of his nature; it is the agency of his will. If certain things are termed holy—such as the land (Canaan), person (priest), place (sanctuary), or time (holy day)—they are so by virtue of divine dispensation. [Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus*, p. 730]

Created in God’s image, we strive to emulate God’s holiness, and *kashrut* is one means to do this. As we have already seen, the rabbis’ understanding of God’s holiness is related to how we act in the world—“just as God is merciful so should you be merciful.” *Kashrut* is, then, a specific ethical teaching. Professor Jacob Milgrom, a Bible scholar, sug-

gests that the biblical dietary laws are part of a larger structure that calls upon Jews to increase holiness in the world. The world can be divided into *kadosh*, the “holy,” and *hol*, the “common” or “ordinary.” The task of the Jew is to expand holiness by transforming the common into the holy.

Specifically, *kashrut* is a holy and ethical way of eating with a basic goal of teaching a reverence for life. This is accomplished through the various laws of food consumption. (1) The criteria of chewing cud or fins and scales limits greatly what kinds of animals can be eaten. The slaughtering of these animals is done in a way that very quickly brings about unconsciousness and death. (2) Milk, which is a symbol of life and nurturance, cannot be eaten together with meat, which is an image of death. While recognizing that death exists, we try to keep the two realms separate. (3) There is a prohibition against consuming blood, which is seen as representing the life force of living creatures. In ancient times the blood was spilled on the sacrificial altar or buried. Today, kosher meat is salted to draw out the blood.

These practices are intended to remind us that the taking of the life of animals for food is a concession to us by God; it is not a human right. Animals are also God’s creatures. When we eat meat, we must do so within a context that reveres life.

“*Kashrut*, then, is a kind of spiritual ecology, manifesting a deep, subliminal process which Mircea Eliade termed ‘religious nostalgia,’ the universal desire of people to ‘live in the world as when it came from the Creator’s hands, fresh, pure and strong’ ” (Samuel Weintraub in *Reconstructionist* 77[2], winter 1991, pp. 12–14).

The eating of animals seems, somehow, to place us at one remove from that ideal condition. It is obvious that animals do not simply exist for our pleasure, so the consumption of flesh is a compromise. It should not separate us from our quality of mercy, as the following story suggests:

A calf was being taken to be slaughtered. Just then Rabbi Judah the Prince (known simply as Rabbi) was seated in front of the Babylonians’ house of study in Sepphorias. The calf broke away, hid its

head under Rabbi's skirts, and lowed pitifully, as though pleading, "Save me." "Go," said Rabbi. "For this you were created."

Then it was said in heaven, "Since he has no pity, let suffering come upon him now."

And they [the sufferings] departed because of another incident: One day Rabbi's maidservant was sweeping the house. Seeing some young weasels lying there, she was about to sweep them away. "Let them be," he said to her, "for it is written, 'And God's tender mercies are over all God's works'" (Psalm 145:9).

Then it was said in heaven, "Since he is compassionate, let Us be compassionate to him." [Talmud, *Bava Metzia* 84b]

Finally, *kashrut* is a discipline. *Kashrut* establishes limitations on what and when we can eat. A sense of limitation on the self can be a powerful acknowledgment of the existence of God.

**The basic laws of kashrut** As mentioned, only certain animals are kosher. The Torah permits eating animals with split hoofs that chew their cud: cattle, sheep, goats, and deer. Most domestic birds are permitted, including chickens, turkeys, ducks, and geese. Fish with fins and scales are permitted, such as bass, bluefish, carp, cod, flounder, fluke, haddock, halibut, herring, mackerel, pike, red snapper, salmon, sardines, trout, tuna, and whitefish. All fruits and vegetables are kosher. Animals and birds must be slaughtered in a ritual manner called *shehitah*. The person who is trained to perform this correctly is known as a *shoheit*. The basic method is severing the trachea and esophagus in one swift motion with a very sharp knife. This is reputed to be a relatively painless way to kill an animal. Kosher animals cannot be stunned or shot (nor for that matter be found dead of natural causes in the woods). Only this manner of ritual slaughter makes the meat kosher. (Fish are not ritually slaughtered and can be caught in the usual manner.)

The Torah's prohibition against seething a kid in its mother's milk has been interpreted to mean that milk and meat may not be eaten together. This has created three food categories: meat (*fleishik* or *besari*), including all meat and fowl; dairy (*milchik* or *halavi*), including milk

and foods derived from milk, like cheese, butter, and yogurt; and everything not specifically placed in the above two categories (*pareve*), including fruits, vegetables, most drinks, and most pasta. Fish is also defined as *pareve*. One can eat *pareve* food with either milk or meat, but one cannot eat milk and meat together at the same meal. It is customary to wait after eating meat before eating dairy. There are a number of different customs in this regard based on the practice of different Jewish communities. For instance Jews of Eastern European descent wait six hours, while German Jews wait three hours. Some communities wait only one hour. The separation of meat and milk led to the practice of having two sets of dishes, silverware, pots and pans, etc.: one for milk and one for meat.

Those who observe *kashrut* soon discover that neither liberal nor strict observance precludes a great variety. No matter how strict one's observance may be, rest assured that there is someone in the Jewish world who will refuse to eat in your home, claiming that their measure of piety is still stricter. Some areas of choice include:

**Processed foods** It is fairly simple to keep kosher with respect to unprocessed foods. You can buy fresh fruit anywhere and fresh meat from a kosher butcher. (Many people will buy fresh fish at any fish store. Some will only buy at a kosher fish market out of concern that the knife used to cut your kosher fish may have just been used to cut a nonkosher fish and particles of the previous fish may still be on the knife.) Processed foods, however, are more complicated. Some people will only buy products that have a label indicating rabbinical supervision, such as the *OU*. This certifies the processed food is kosher.

**Rabbinical supervision** There are many organizations and rabbis that give rabbinical supervision to food. Besides the *OU*, the *kof-k* and the *OK* are two other labels used by prominent organizations. There is no centralized clearinghouse for all these different rabbinical supervisions, though many use the letter *K* in some form or another. Check with your rabbi if you have a question about a product's *kashrut* supervision.

**Ingredients** Others will read the ingredients on the package to see if all the ingredients seem kosher. The concern here basically lies in three areas. (1) There may be an ingredient which is so minute it is not listed in the package, e.g., lard to grease the machines. (2) The same company may also make nonkosher products and not be careful enough when switching from one production line to another. (3) The manufacturer might run out of one ingredient and substitute another, e.g., a meat tomato sauce for a marinara. For some people the complexity of the processing makes a difference. They will use milk without rabbinical supervision (since milk is simply processed), but they will only eat cookies with rabbinical supervision because any of the above concerns could be applicable. It is important to remember that nothing is fool-proof. Rabbinical supervision does not mean that a rabbi is standing there all day watching Nabisco make Oreo cookies. In most plants there are occasional inspections. There is no absolute guarantee against a piece of a worker's ham sandwich falling into the cookie vat. It is only a question of where the reasonable line is to be drawn and how cautious you want to be.

If you are reading ingredients, here are some things to look for:

- Shortening, glycerides, stearates. These could be either animal or vegetable if not specified.
- Whey, lactose, lactic acid, sodium caseinate. These may be milk derivatives; products that contain them should not be eaten with meat. For instance, many breads contain dairy ingredients that pose a problem for your hot dog roll. Most margarines are also dairy.

**Other decision points** Cheeses are an interesting *kashrut* conundrum. Almost all cheeses are made with rennet, which comes from the stomach of cows. Orthodox opinion is that kosher cheese needs to be made from rennet taken from kosher animals. A Conservative opinion says that rennet is no longer a food substance but rather a chemical. Chemicals fall outside the boundaries of *kashrut* laws. The Conservative opinion is based on the logic that if rennet were still a food, then even from a kosher animal it would be a mixture of milk and meat. But

since rennet is a chemical, all domestically produced hard cheeses are kosher. The Orthodox view argues that the standards for meat and milk are different than for kosher and nonkosher products and therefore all cheeses need rabbinical supervision to certify that the rennet comes from a kosher animal. (A similar dispute exists about gelatin, which is made from the bones of animals. Has gelatin become a chemical or does it retain the classification of "animal"?)

There is also an argument about the status of swordfish and sturgeon, because they have scales only at one stage of their lives. Orthodox opinion is that they do not meet the criterion of fins and scales; Conservative opinion is that they do.

**Kosher wine** The concern about wine is not so much that someone will put liquid lard into the wine. Ancillary to the laws of *kashrut* is a category of foods that are forbidden because they may have been used in idol worship. Such things are forbidden for Jews to use even after the idol-worshipping ritual is over. In ancient times wine libations to the gods were common. Kosher wine exists to eliminate the possibility that the wine was once used in an idolatrous ceremony. There is also a traditional prohibiting of any wine handled by non-Jews as a means to discourage socializing and intermarriage. Even today there are some people who will not drink wine if it has been touched (poured) by a non-Jew, even if the wine was originally kosher. How then do non-Jewish waiters pour wine at Jewish wedding feasts? Some kosher wine is boiled after its production is completed, and thereby halakhically it no longer has the status of wine. This may explain why some kosher wine doesn't taste like wine either!

**Glatt kosher** Glatt kosher literally means "smooth" kosher. After an animal is slaughtered, its lungs are checked for lesions. If the animal would have died on its own because of these lesions in the not-too-distant future, then the animal is not considered kosher. Glatt kosher raises the standards of what lesions fall into the nonkosher-making category and requires "smoother" lungs. This stringency has only become widely observed in the last twenty-five years. Glatt kosher has come to mean "extra kosher" and has been incorrectly applied to

kosher chickens (the issue of lesions on the lungs does not apply to chickens) and even to “glatt kosher pizza.”

**Lettuce** A more recent issue has arisen regarding lettuce. While all vegetables are kosher, eating the little bugs sometimes found in lettuce is forbidden. The standards of how big the little bugs can be has risen to such an extent that some people won't eat lettuce no matter how carefully washed or will only eat hydroponically grown lettuce. This concern has spread to other vegetables. Others ignore this concern by pointing out that such vegetables have been eaten since time immemorial.

**Halav yisrael** Not as popular yet among the traditional crowd is “Jewish milk,” which stems from the concern that milk from non-kosher animals could be mixed in with cow milk. *Halav yisrael* is milk produced by Jews who consciously avoid any such practices.

**Hindquarters** Because of the prohibition against eating the sciatic nerve (see Gen. 32:33), kosher meat from the hindquarters of animals is not generally available. It is very difficult to remove the nerve and most butchers do not have this skill. Among Jewish communities of Middle Eastern origin, however, the hindquarters are available from kosher butchers.

**Blood** As mentioned, blood is seen as a symbol of life. Therefore, the consuming of blood is prohibited. Meat is salted to draw out as much of the blood as possible. Usually the butcher does this. For those who want to avoid salt, broiling meat also draws out the blood and thus eliminates the requirement for salting.

The desire to avoid blood applies to a blood spot found in an egg. Therefore, eggs are cracked open and checked before being used. Since unless otherwise indicated eggs sold in the United States are not fertilized, only the blood spot, and not the whole egg, must be discarded.

Since the blood in liver is difficult to remove, the regular salting of kosher meat is not seen as effective. Therefore, kosher liver is always broiled.

**New kashrut practices: vegetarianism** A growing number of people are opting for vegetarianism for health, ecological, or moral reasons. According to the Bible, of course, there was a time when all human beings were vegetarians. In a practical sense, vegetarianism greatly simplifies the laws surrounding *kashrut*. There are no issues regarding the mixing of milk and meat. Nor is there a problem with nonkosher food, since all nonmeats are kosher. Of course, one still needs to check the labels of processed food for ingredients derived from meat. Since *kashrut* considers fish as *pareve* and nonmeat, some Jewish vegetarians will eat fish but not animals. Still others will eat meat on Shabbat or other festive occasions because traditionally meat is part of festive meals. Others have not become strict vegetarians but have cut down their consumption of meat. They use the *kashrut* categories to create a scale with animal meat at the bottom, then birds (e.g., chicken) next, and finally fish. (According to the Talmud, birds are really *pareve*, but in practice they are considered meat.)

**Eco-kashrut** Zalman Schachter-Shalomi coined the phrase “eco-kashrut.” *Eco-kashrut* suggests that we apply new principles to the ancient practice of *kashrut*. It shares the assumption with traditional *kashrut* that what we eat makes a difference to our spiritual lives. According to *eco-kashrut*, modern methods of food production have created new categories of unkosher foods. While there is no specific set of guidelines for *eco-kashrut*, its proponents have raised such questions as: Is food grown with pesticides kosher? Are chickens raised in densely packed coops that may violate the law by causing pain to animals (*tza'ar baalei hayyim*) kosher? Are grapes harvested by underpaid workers kosher? Are products that are overpackaged kosher? *Eco-kashrut* adherents express spiritual awareness regarding exploitation of workers, ecology, health, and cruelty to animals, all of which have sources in the Jewish tradition.

**Creating a kashrut practice** In establishing a personal practice for *kashrut*, there are two major concerns: what you will do in your home and what you will do outside your home.

In your home, practice could range from:

- No pig
- No pig or shellfish
- Above plus only kosher meat
- Above plus not eating milk and meat together
- Above plus checking the ingredients of processed food
- Above plus two sets of dishes, pots, and silverware
- Above plus only using food with kosher supervision

Similar choices need to be made in eating outside the home, whether in a restaurant or at a friend's house. Except where paper plates and plastic utensils are available, one difference is that you have to assume that plates and utensils are not kosher. Otherwise, the normal range of options includes:

- No pig or shellfish
- No meat
- No cooked foods (e.g., eating salads)
- Cooked foods whose ingredients seem okay, e.g., pasta with marinara sauce
- Eating only in kosher restaurants

These options do not include all the possibilities, and people may create varying standards for eating at home and eating outside the home. The desire to socialize and enjoy restaurants has meant that even many Jews who observe some form of *kashrut* will eat in restaurants with some restricting practices. Some make exceptions to their general practice out of respect for parents and other relatives, for example, by eating Thanksgiving dinner in a grandparent's nonkosher home.

### Food as Social Intercourse

Food is also a means for people to have social interaction. Part of the enjoyment derived from eating comes from eating with others. This is reflected ritually in the *birkat ha-mazon*, the Grace after Meals. If three or more people have eaten together, an introductory formula is added

to the regular blessings. This formula, called *zimun*, is an "invitation" by one person (as leader) to the others at the table to join in reciting blessings to praise God. The idea is that a fellowship has been created (even if it is just a transitory fellowship) when people break bread together. A shared meal, then, has an additional sacred character.

### Words of Torah

If three have eaten at the same table and words of Torah were spoken, it is as if they had eaten at the table of God. [*Ethics of Our Ancestors* 3:3]

"Words of Torah" does not necessarily imply talk of Judaism and its teachings, rather that the table conversation has been "good speech." In the previous chapter, we talked about *lashon ha-ra*, literally "evil speech." Gossip and slander, words that destroy, are not words of Torah. All other speech, no matter how trivial or casual, is, in this context, "words of Torah."

Meals are also offerings made for celebratory occasions. On Shabbat and festivals, part of our celebration consists of good foods, special foods, and drink. Traditionally, Jews saved their best foods for Shabbat.

A special category of meals is known as *seudat mitzvah*, literally "a *mitzvah* meal." The feast following a wedding is one example. It is not just a party, but a part of the wedding ritual itself. Specifically, as we will see when we discuss weddings, it fulfills our obligation to rejoice with the bride and groom. The meal served at a *brit milah* (circumcision) has the same kind of ritual character. There is also a tradition that, upon completing a course of study, a *seudat mitzvah* is held in celebration. All these meals are sacred in character, probably meant to be similar to the experience of eating the meat of sacrifices brought to the Temple in Jerusalem in ancient times. Even as we party and have a good time, we bring a higher spiritual awareness to a sacred occasion.

## Practice

It is a challenge to eat with awareness amid busy schedules and business lunches. Even the ritual does not always help. Sometimes, like eating, the practice of *kasbrut* and the saying of *berakhot* become rote matters.

My practice is to pause for a few seconds in silence, then recite the *berakhah* or its equivalent, and then eat the first bite of food slowly and with consciousness. Paying attention to just the first bite is a good beginning. It also echoes the tradition that the first fruits of the harvest were seen as having a special status. (They were offered up in the Temple as part of the sacrificial system in ancient times.) Like many people, though, when I am in a hurry, I sometimes eat food even before it and I have reached the table. To help me avoid this trap, I try to ritually wash my hands before I eat a meal as a way to prepare my spirit. (I do that even if I am not eating bread, which is when washing is traditionally required.) Another way of slowing down to raise consciousness might be achieved through a conscious setting of the table.

Reciting even the short form of the after-eating blessings is a way to honor the food, the preparation of the food, and the experience of eating before rushing off to the next activity. It is also another transition point calling us to awareness.

Through eating one dish and one meal a week (or a Shabbat meal) with true *kavanah* for the sake of heaven, and to lift up the animal powers of your soul to God, you raise up spiritually all the food and meals you ate that week. [Rabbi Tzadok ha-Cohen, *P'ri Tzaddik*]

"A wooden altar three cubits high . . . and he said unto me: 'This is the table that is before the Lord' " (Ez. 41:22). Why does the verse begin by calling it an altar and end by calling it a table? Because, as R. Yohanan and R. Eleazar both said, as long as the Temple stood, the altar made expiation for Israel, but now a person's table makes expiation for her. [Talmud, *Berakhot* 54b-55a]

Our goal then is to come to the table with a sense that this is a table set before God. What should it mean that our dining tables have taken

the place of the sacrificial altar in the Temple? Certainly, that our eating should feel as holy as the sacred process of eating the meat of those Temple sacrifices. For the worshiper in the Temple, such sacred feasts must have felt as though they were eating in the very Presence of God. We can easily imagine the sense of holiness experienced by the elders who, after the revelation at Sinai, ascended the mountain with Moses and saw a vision of God in the context of a meal—"they beheld God and they ate and drank" (Exod. 24:11).

Sadly—with pre-cooked foods, microwaves, takeout and home delivery—many of us hardly touch our food before consuming it, let alone physically prepare it or reflect on its origin in divine love and wisdom. [Samuel Weintraub in *Reconstructionist* 77(2), winter 1991, pp. 12-14]

It may also be that our tables are like altars when we offer up on them healthy eating instead of overeating. Just as the animals offered in the Temple had to be from the right category and also needed to be without blemish, so should our foods be "unblemished." We can offer up food at our tables that does not blemish our bodies. Perhaps at our tables we want to sacrifice our gluttony, our behaving like animals who eat only out of instinct. We surely forget that we are created in the Divine image when we "stuff our faces."

Instead, this is the table set before Adonai. Eating is an opportunity to open ourselves to the holy. By opening our mouths, we open ourselves to that potential. Eating can be dangerous. Our vulnerabilities and insecurities are exposed and yet at the same time it is an opportunity. The pleasure from food is to be enjoyed, not avoided in an asceticism that would in effect deny this gift from God.

*Ta'amu u're'u ki tov Adonai*, "Taste and see how good God is" (Psalm 34:9).