

Eating: Carnally and Spiritually

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One place I always make a pilgrimage to when in Israel is the Burger King on Ben Yehuda Street in downtown Jerusalem. I just feel so “normal” walking up to the counter, with a kippah on my head, and ordering a *Vopper*. You see there’s no “w” sound in Hebrew, so a Whopper becomes a *Vopper*, and fries in Israel are called ‘*cheeps*.’ *Vopper eem cheeps bevakasha!* The pimply-faced Israeli teenager behind the counter then asks: *Le’hagdil?* Supersize? My answer: *Betach!* Of course! How often am I in Jerusalem... Eating at Burger King in Israel reminds me of my youth when I didn’t have to go 6,000 miles for a fast food burger; and it gives me something of a messianic vision of the future, when all food, whether cooked fast or slow, will be kosher-- At least that’s *my* theology! I must admit, though, that Burger King’s latest ad campaign is rather disturbing. In fact the mascot himself, with that oversized plastic mask and bejeweled crown and flowing robes really irks me. In BK’s latest commercial, the king smashes through windows and walls, creating havoc and destruction in order to deliver the newest sandwich concept for *only \$3.99*. As he hands over the sandwich, white coated mental health professionals show up to take him back to the asylum. Crazy...such a sandwich for only \$3.99! The real mental health community is up in arms about this spoof on mental illness, and what is actually insane is that people pay for a sandwich packed with 970 calories and 61 grams of fat! That is indeed a lot of content for \$4...but I think it’s the customer not the king who’s crazy.

This commercial is just one indicator of our culture’s schizophrenic relationship with food...please forgive yet another psychiatric term. On the one hand we are enticed to run out to buy a 7 oz burger slathered with battered, fried onions, American cheese, mayonnaise and other health unconscious delectables, and on the other hand we constantly get the message in every media that you can never be too skinny (or rich), and that beauty is no longer the visage of Rembrandt’s *zaftig* Artemisia, but of emaciated size zero models. Just as an aside, the word *zaftig* is Yiddish for buxom or plump. My precious mother, who is known as *Safta* by her grandchildren...the Hebrew word for grandmother, was concerned that *zaftig* and *safta* sounded too similar even though there’s no etymological connection between them...And even though she is not at all *zaftig*...So much for the beloved chubby bubby!

Pop culture teaches: you should run out to buy a 1000 calorie burger and look like Alessandra Ambrosio. Only recently, with skyrocketing rates of obesity in this country, have people begun to think seriously about our relationship with food as well as our propensity to abuse it. Some have hesitated to call over-eating a disease or even an addiction. After all, everybody needs to eat. You don’t have to smoke though, or drink alcohol. But as we have come to understand the abuse of food as a cover for much deeper psychological pain like self-loathing, the desire for

love or comfort or companionship, an outlet for anxiety, hurt, or stress, many people now understand that overeating and food disorders are serious and even life threatening.

At first blush you might think that Judaism contributes to the problem rather than provides an antidote to it. After all we just came off of an eight day holiday when confections and cakes, filled with unimaginable ingredients like 16 eggs in a single recipe compete to authentically substitute for the leavened cakes of the rest of the year. Food is so much a part of Jewish culture, and contrary to popular mythology, kosher does not necessarily mean healthy! Moreover, food is a convener of community in Judaism and understood to be a symbol of joy and spirituality. Within the framework of Jewish values, food is to be enjoyed. One is forbidden to fast on the Sabbath, and we are supposed to have three meals as an expression of our unique Shabbat joy. A meal is a requisite part of every Jewish life cycle event, from *bris*, to marriage, to the *seudat havra'ah*, the special meal of consolation following a funeral. We abstain from eating only for specific and rather short snippets of time: In an entire year, there are only two 24-hour fast days. Yet we also find that food can be problematic when it is over-idealized. All of Esau's problems, for example, are somehow connected to food. Isaac's favoritism of Esau is related seemingly to the only way this father and son relate to each other, that is their shared taste for gamey foods. Esau sells his birthright because of his dependence on food... 'Give me some of that red stuff you're making,' he barks to his brother Jacob, 'I am famished.' Food becomes his overarching need, his obsession, and giving away something that should have meant more to him is the consequence of Esau's compulsive eating. The Torah says: "he ate, he drank, and he rose and went away. *Vayivez Eisav et ha'bechora*...Thus did Esau spurn the birthright." Even the proverbial wayward son, the *ben soreir u'moreh* of Deuteronomy 21 is identified as a *soleil ve'sovei-a*, a drunkard and a glutton...Seemingly, his insubordination to his parents involved the abuse of food and drink.

The irony of overeating is that a person does it in order to feel better...to experience relief or comfort, but almost always ends up suffering...Suffering from guilt that they overate; Suffering from shame, or even physically suffering from the effects of self-inflicted, abusive behavior. Rambam wrote in his halachic treatise *Hilchot De'ot* that "Overeating is like poison to the body." The medieval physician wrote "most illnesses which affect a person are caused by harmful foods or by...overeating, even healthy foods. This was implied by King Solomon in his wisdom (Prov. 21:23): 'He who guards his mouth and tongue guards himself from trouble.'" Earlier in the treatise Rambam authors the great precursor to all modern diet books...A thousand years ago he wrote: "Never eat when you are not hungry, never drink when you are not thirsty." He taught that one should never eat until you're completely full, but only until you are $\frac{3}{4}$ full. Can you imagine if Oprah could have met the Rambam...what a profile he would get in *O Magazine*! The message of the Rambam or of the Torah is not to abstain from eating. The message is to eat in moderation and to eat for the right reasons.

An interesting comment in Proverbs states: *Tzaddik ocheil lisbo'a nafsho*...a righteous person eats to satisfy his soul. What I like about this verse is that eating is not only carnal, it is also spiritual. And this is in essence the rationale of kashrut, as detailed in our parasha this morning. If the Torah means to tell us anything about eating it is that eating is a both a physical and spiritual act. Nowhere in Parashat Shemini do we find a calorie count or a nutritional guide.

What we do find are the words: *Vi'hitem kedoshim ki kadosh Ani...* You be holy, because I am holy. By making choices about food and eating, you distinguish yourself as a higher being...An organism that not only feeds itself, but that is contemplative about its own nourishment. That is the rationale of kashrut: Training us to view eating as a reflection of a relationship with the deepest part of ourselves and with God. In a world that sends us such mixed messages about food...a world that encourages us to indulge but never to gain a pound...a world where we are deluged with a cacophony of messages about food...kashrut offers a way to re-imagine food as a source of pleasure, as a symbol of joy; and also something that is not a free for all, not to be taken for granted or ingested without a word of thanks for whence it came. I encountered something meaningful that made me think of kashrut in the most unlikely of places...*O Magazine!* In an excerpt from Geneen Roth's new book *Women, Food, and God*, this author, teacher, and child of a Holocaust survivor wrote the following that caught my eye:

"When you like something you pay attention to it. When you like something—you take time with it. You want to be present for every second of the rapture. But overeating does not lead to rapture. It leads to ... being so sick you can't think of anything but how full you are. That's not love, that's suffering."

What does this have to do with kashrut...I think that Kashrut is about taking time with food. It's about being intentional about what we put in our mouths. It is about making choices, and it is about moderation. And it is NOT about suffering. It is about love. Love of our bodies, love of our selves, and love of God. It may not be the way your grandfather explained it to you, but I think it goes right to the core of the Torah's message. As the poet Galway Kinnell wrote (also quoted by Roth): "Sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness."