

Food For Thought Parashat Ekev

Rabbi Jason Miller

A Jewish man was walking on Regent Street in London and stopped in to a posh gourmet food shoppe. An impressive salesperson in morning coat with tails approached him and politely asked, "Can I help you, Sir?"

"Yes," replied the customer, "I would like to buy a pound of lox."

"No. No," responded the dignified salesperson, "You mean smoked salmon."

"Okay, a pound of smoked salmon."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, a dozen blintzes."

"No. No. You mean crepes."

"Okay, a dozen crepes."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. A pound of chopped liver."

No. No. You mean paté."

"Okay," said the Jewish patron, "A pound of pate. And," he added, "I'd like you to deliver this to my house next Saturday."

"Look," retorted the indignant salesperson, "We don't schlep on Shabbos!"

It should be no wonder that so many Jewish jokes, like this one, have to do with food and eating. Judaism and food seem to go hand-in-hand. Each of our many holidays have their own staple dishes, and even on days like Yom Kippur, when fasting is in order, we never fail to put together a delicious break fast meal for the completion of the holy day. Chicken and kugel on Shabbat, Latkes and Jelly doughnuts for Hanukkah, Hamantashen on Purim, dairy on Shavuot, and any time seems to be the right time for gefilte fish and matzah ball soup. We even joke that we can easily explain our holidays as: "They tried to kill us, we survived, now let's eat!"

And we pay much attention to each food detail when it comes to feeding our guests at our life cycle celebrations. Those of you who cook and cook well, might even be known for some of your favorite recipes. Judaism is no doubt a gastronomical religion. Just think of all the foods that we consider to be Jewish foods: bagels, lox, rugelach, chopped liver, kniches, pastrami on rye, kishke, and the list goes on. Some of our foods have been mainstreamed into society over time. Remember, a decade ago, you couldn't find a bagel in Fargo, North Dakota!

Food is very important to us. What would Pesach be without fried matzah for breakfast? Perhaps, kind of like a birthday party without cake and ice cream. What we eat says a lot about us as well. It was once said, "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are." Some of us are vegetarian, but even that label might not reveal everything about one's eating style. There are vegetarians for health reasons, and vegetarians for political or ethical reasons. Today, there are vegans and there are vegetarians who will

eat fish. Some of us will only eat organic foods. With kashrut too, we Jews focus much attention on what goes into our mouths and into our kitchens and homes.

Trying to stay healthy and look good is a goal for many. And food obviously plays a big part in this agenda. We can watch our friends eat, and know immediately which of the latest diet fads they're on – low fat, no carbs, only diet shakes, or health bars three times a day.

On a personal level, my eating habits were altered a year ago when I discovered I had an allergy to wheat. I can no longer enjoy some of my favorite foods without getting sick. People often wonder how one can subsist without bread, and I am quick to refer them to this morning's Torah portion. In chapter 8 of Deuteronomy, it states *lo al lechem l'vado yich'ye ha'adam* (Man does not live on bread alone). I was of course quite comforted by this verse in the Torah. Until, that is, I stumbled upon a text from the midrash on the Book of Psalms which states that a man can live without spices, but not without wheat.

As you can see, although we might only eat three meals a day, and have a nosh here and there, eating remains a central act in our existence. Dare I say, we couldn't survive without it. But regardless of what we eat, how it was prepared, how good it tasted or looked or cost, we must be cognizant of God's role in its creation.

In this morning's parsha, Parshat Ekev, we have the command to give thanks to God, our Creator, for our meal – for the food we eat. *V'achalta v'savata u'verachta* – “When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God.” The Kotzker Rebbe taught that saying the Grace After Meals – Birkat Hamazon – is the fundamental mitzvah in that all of us are capable to feel grateful that the earth produced food for us to eat.

Reciting Birkat Hamazon, or in Yiddish *bentchen*, is an expression of thanksgiving to God, which, like reciting a blessing before the meal, elevates the activity of eating from simply a physical routine into the realm of the holy, the sacred. When we feel content after a meal and show our appreciation to not only the cook or chef, but to God who fashioned the world, we make the act of eating a spiritual act. The Talmud, in fact, teaches that it is forbidden for anyone to enjoy anything in this world without a bracha, a blessing. And if this is the case, how true it must be for the meals we consume.

Birkat Hamazon, in its full form, contains four separate blessings: for food, for the land, for Jerusalem, and for God's goodness. We add extra sections when appropriate for holidays, Shabbat, and Rosh Chodesh. The first three blessings are considered by most scholars to be the oldest extant Jewish prayers. The Talmud attributes these brachot to Moses, Joshua, and Kings David and Solomon respectively. Much of Birkat Hamazon focuses on the *eretz* – the land. And for good reason.

We strive to educate our children as to the chain of transmission that brings our food to our mouths. We explain that the bowl of cereal they are eating didn't just magically appear on the breakfast table. We trace it back for them to the local grocer who received the cereal box from the company who manufactured the wheat that it got from the farmer who harvested it on his field. We teach them that God allowed the right amount of rainfall to make those crops grow so that we can eat and survive. But sometimes, it is we who must be reminded how food gets to our plates. When we make the connection between the food we eat and God's goodness and power in the world, we, ourselves, connect to God.

At synagogue meals, in youth group conventions and Israel trips, summer camps, and large communal gatherings, Birkat Hamazon is often the norm. And while many of us don't always remember to express our graciousness to God after each and every meal we consume, we do contribute to the holiness and majesty of life cycle events by offering thanksgiving as a community. These celebratory meals are known as *seudot mitzvah*, feasts observing the mitzvah that has taken place. In fact, at wedding meals, the Birkat Hamazon, is one of the highlights of the event with a special invitation for the guests to partake in the *bentching* ritual. Similarly, the invitation offered by the leader of Birkat Hamazon is adapted based on the number of diners participating, with more acclaim for God the bigger the crowd – when ten eat together, a thousand, ten thousand, and so on.

We put a lot of time and thought into family recipes, restaurant menus, caterers, diets, which snack foods to buy, and how pretty the wedding cake looked. But we need to be thankful that we have food to eat. When, at the Pesach seder, we say “let all who are hungry come and eat,” we must really concentrate on what it is we are saying. While we debate which restaurant to go to, others are struggling to survive their hunger. We can complement our blessings after our meals by offering our tzedakah to organizations like Mazon, a Jewish Response to Hunger. We must remember that there are many Jews who do not *bentch*, but it is not because they forgot or don’t know how. It is because they don’t have the food to eat.

In Judaism, the table we eat on is *kadosh* – it is of a holy nature because the act that occurs at our table is a holy act. Let us make certain to keep in mind just what a holy act it is each time we sit down to a meal. Let us connect to God, offering our gratitude for our nourishment. Eating can be routine. These days we’re always in a rush and have made the “fast food”/“drive thru” industry very prosperous. But, let us take on the ritual of Birkat Hamazon – thanking God after each meal. We should continue to attribute importance to food, but remember to give thanks where thanks is due, before and after we eat. Just as food is the sustenance of life, recognizing that God has provided for our needs becomes the sustenance of our spiritual and religious lives. May we all be blessed with much nourishment and appreciation in our lives. And let us say Amen.

Shabbat Shalom.