

Jews and Food – Can we Make it Better
Yom Kippur Morning
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Temple Emanu-El, Edison, NJ
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If I were to ask of you this morning: what is the glue that keeps Jews together, what might you answer? Those trying to please the rabbi might say Torah is, more than anything else, the essence of the Jewish people. Others might say it is family, or friends. Some will respond to the question by citing our history, and the important lessons we have learned from the many tragedies we have survived. Still others will share that *tikkun olam*, acts of repairing the world, is really what keeps the Jewish people modern in our ever-changing world.

Now, if I ask you this morning to think of your most meaningful Jewish experiences, describe them in great detail, what would you include? I'm guessing we would hear about the beautiful wedding you celebrated with your *b'shert*, or the day your child became a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or the day we as a community officially welcomed your child into the covenant. I might also hear responses including the 50-person *seder* your grandmother would host each year, from one end of the house to the other. Or the incredible Rosh Hashanah celebration with all parts of your family that rotated down from one generation to another. And there will be those who cite their most meaningful Jewish experiences as the meal of condolence you had after the death of the matriarch of the family, a meal in which the food was insignificant but the company was never to be forgotten.

And finally, if I were to ask you this morning to describe your favorite Jewish rituals, what might you share? I suspect some of you would describe the ritual of making home made gefilte fish before Rosh Hashanah every year, stinking up the house with the smells of those fish. In my family, you would hear of our Friday challah making ritual, and the smell of challah that still permeates the house when we return from services on Friday nights. Or the mandel bread your bubby used to

make. Or the borsht your grandfather always loved. Or just the way your great-grandmother would roll the butter cake for break-fast ever year.

There is no question that we Jews spend a lot of time with food, for food is, in many ways, the glue that keeps the Jewish people together, the center of our most meaningful Jewish experiences, and a part of our favorite Jewish rituals. Food is not just something that is culturally and stereotypically connected to the Jewish people, but it is a part of every Jewish ritual and life cycle event, every holiday celebration and home ritual, and with good reason. Food is sustenance, and we Jews have always looked for ways to sustain ourselves.

For those of us performing the mitzvah of fasting today, on our greatest fast day, you may think it is somewhat cruel that I am discussing food this morning. However, I think part of the idea behind fasting is to push ourselves, while adhering to the ritual of fasting, to think about food in a new way. Why do we fast today? At a rather simplistic level, we fast as a part of our process of atonement. For one full day, we set aside our physical cravings for sustenance in order to find a different level of nourishment.

What is Torah trying to teach us by decreeing this day as a day of fasting? One colleague of mine considers fasting to be the Bible's spiritual diet, and he claims fasting to provide some basic lessons for each of us:

1. Fasting teaches compassion. It is easy to talk about the world's hunger problem. We can feel sorry that millions of people go to bed hungry each day, but it isn't until one can really feel it in one's own body that the impact is truly felt.
2. Fasting is an exercise in will power. Most people think they can't fast because it's so hard. In a society full of self-indulgence, we lack self-discipline. Fasting goes in direct opposition to our increasing "softness" in life.

3. Fasting serves as penance. Self-inflicted pain alleviates guilt, although... it is much better to reduce one's guilt with offsetting acts of righteousness to others.
4. Fasting is a denial of dependencies. We live in a consumer society, constantly bombarded by others telling us what we must have to be healthy, happy, popular or wise. By fasting we assert that we do not need to be dependent on external things, even such an essential thing as food.
5. Fasting can improve our physical health. Of course not simply a 24-hour fast, but the Yom Kippur fast can awaken us to the importance of how much, and how often, we eat.
6. Fasting is simply good for the soul. It is an aid for spiritual experiences. For most people, the hunger pains are a distraction. However, it can be the beginning of a new awakening, a different level of spirituality, as I discussed last night.
7. Fasting is, simply put, a mitzvah, and by fasting, we are performing a mitzvah, not just a good deed as we so often define it, but a commandment. We do not do mitzvot in order to benefit ourselves. We do mitzvot because our duty as Jews requires that we do them. And fasting is a very personal mitzvah. Fasting on Yom Kippur is a personal offering to the God of Israel from each member of the family of Israel.
8. And finally, fasting should be combined with the study of Torah, for the more one studies, the less one has need of fasting.¹

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So this year, on this day during the year set aside for fasting, while our stomachs are empty, let us begin to feed our souls, and let the topic for this year be about food, the true glue of the Jewish people. I would like to begin this conversation with the topic of food as it pertains to health. Each and every morning, we are

¹ Adapted from article "Fasting: The Bible's Spiritual Diet" by Rabbi Allen S. Maller in Moments of Transcendence: Inspirational Readings for Yom Kippur, edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins.

supposed to join in the prayer *Asher Yatzar*, which we sang together at the beginning of this service. This prayer says: “Blessed are You, O God, who formed the human body with skill, creating the body’s many pathways and openings.” And in the prayer, it states that if one of these openings be wrongly opened or closed, it would be impossible to function the way God intended.

Perhaps we have heard the expression that our bodies are our Temples. If we trust that perhaps the greatest gift is the gift of life, and our bodies are symbolic of that gift, then why do we not pay better attention to what we are doing with our bodies? I would like to suggest that it is a very Jewish thing to talk about the real essence of food, what we are feeding our selves and our families, where it is coming from and how we should be re-examining our relationship with food.

In 2010, one of the hottest topics is food. We hear about organics versus conventional, vegetarianism, the locavore movement, sustainable agriculture, SLOW food, CSA’s, and much more. In case you are not familiar, the locavore movement encourages consumers to buy from farmers’ markets or even to grow or pick their own food, arguing that fresh, local products are more nutritious and taste better. Locavores also shun supermarket offerings as an environmentally friendly measure, since shipping food over long distances often requires more fuel for transportation. “The word ‘locavore’ shows how food-lovers can enjoy what they eat while still appreciating the impact they have on the environment. It’s significant in that it brings together eating and ecology in a new way.” The term locavore was coined five years ago by a group of four women in San Francisco who proposed that local residents should try to eat only food grown or produced within a 100-mile radius. Other regional movements have emerged since then, though some groups refer to themselves as “localvores” rather than “locavores.” However it’s spelled, it’s a word to watch, and it was actually named Oxford Dictionary’s word of the year for 2007. ²

² From www.locavores.com/home

Similarly, the Slow Food Movement believes that everyone has a fundamental right to pleasure and consequently the responsibility to protect the heritage of food, tradition and culture that make this pleasure possible. The movement is founded upon this concept of eco-gastronomy – a recognition of the strong connections between plate and planet. Slow Food is good, clean and fair food. They believe that the food we eat should taste good; that it should be produced in a clean way that does not harm the environment, animal welfare or our health; and that food producers should receive fair compensation for their work. They consider themselves co-producers, not consumers, because by being informed about how food is produced and actively supporting those who produce it, we become a part of and a partner in the production process.³

There is no question in my mind that if the rabbis of old were writing the Talmud today, this topic would have its own separate tractate. Not only because we Jews love food so much, and much of our tradition is connected to food, but also because we are taught to think about food before ever it enters our mouths, to be thankful for each and every bite of food before we satiate our hunger. The sages of the Talmud explain that our table is a *Mikdash Me'at*, a little altar, and the foods we eat are symbolic of the offerings that were brought to the Temple in ancient times.

Eating as an act may seem simple, but eating in a way that really fulfills the commandment “to eat and be satisfied and bless” is not. Such conscious eating demands that we slow down and pay attention to what and how we eat. Why do we traditionally recite the *motzi*, the blessing over bread, before every meal we enjoy? Why are there other blessings for food if bread is not the item you are eating? Why do we say *birkat ha-mazon*, the grace after meals, as a thank You for the food we just ate? Our tradition has dictated that we do, in fact, focus on how we satiate our appetites, and in 2010, as educated, caring, thoughtful liberal Jews, it is not enough to simply say: yes, I keep kosher, no, I don't keep kosher, or well, I fall somewhere in the middle.

³ From www.slowfood.com

What do you really know about the food you eat every day, the food we feed our children? We Jews are questioners, and there are some very basic questions we need to be asking:

1. WHAT exactly is the food we are eating?
2. WHERE does it come from?
3. HOW does it get to us?
4. HOW does its production impact the greater world?

Begin with the what, and go from there. As I discussed with you on Rosh Hashanah, we need to be more inquisitive about the factual information being given to us. We can no longer assume that what we read, what is handed to us, is the real truth. This is certainly applicable in the area of food. Several large corporations have all but taken over the food industry, and their control on marketing, government and the likes enables them to tell us what they want us to hear. We now know that we need to be smarter than the average commercial watcher.

I'm hoping that many of you have viewed the 2008 award-winning documentary *Food, Inc.* In this riveting, moving and frightening movie, producer-director Robert Kenner and investigative authors Eric Schlosser, from *Fast Food Nation* and Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, lift the veil on the U.S. food industry – an industry that has often put profit ahead of consumer health, the livelihoods of American farmers, the safety of workers and our own environment. With the use of animation and compelling graphics, the filmmakers expose the highly mechanized, Orwellian underbelly that's been deliberately hidden from the American consumer.

They reveal how a handful of corporations control our nation's food supply. Though the companies try to maintain the myth that our food still comes from farms with red barns and white picket fences, our food is actually raised on massive "factory farms" and processed in mega industrial plants. The animals grow fatter faster and are designed to fit the machines that slaughter them. Tomatoes are bred to be shipped without bruising and to stay

edible for months. Who even knows what season is the true season for tomatoes, strawberries, or watermelons for that matter. The system is highly productive, and Americans are spending less on food than ever before. But at what cost?

Cattle are given feed that their bodies are not biologically designed to digest, resulting in new strains of E. coli bacteria, which sickens roughly 73,000 Americans annually. And because of the high proliferation of processed foods derived from corn, Americans are facing epidemic levels of diabetes among adults and alarming increases in obesity, especially among children. And, surprisingly, all of it is happening right under the noses of our government's regulatory agencies, the USDA and the FDA. The film exposes a "revolving door" of executives from giant food corporations in and out of Washington D.C. that has resulted in a lack of oversight and illuminates how this dysfunctional political system often operates at the expense of the American consumer.

And sadly, in the nation's heartland, farmers have been silenced – afraid to talk about what's happening to the nation's food supply for fear of retaliation and lawsuits from giant corporations.

Our laws today are such that corporations are allowed to patent seeds for crops. Those attorneys and scientists out there will understand this far better than I, but it is astonishing. As a result of this, Monsanto, for example, the former chemical company that manufactured Agent Orange and DDT – in a span of 10 years – has landed its patented gene in 90% of the nation's soybean seeds. Farmers are now forbidden to save and reuse these seeds and must instead buy new seed from Monsanto each season. Armed with a team of employees dedicated to enforcing their seed patents, Monsanto spends millions every year to investigate, intimidate and sue farmers -- many of whom are financially unable to fight the corporation.

Food, Inc. also introduces us to courageous people who refuse to helplessly stand by and do nothing. Some, like Stonyfield Farm's Gary Hirshberg and Polyface Farm's Joel Salatin, are finding ways to work inside and outside the system to improve the quality of our food. Their stories, both heartbreaking and heroic, serve to demonstrate the level of humanity and commitment it takes to fight the corporations that control the food industry.

Food, Inc. illustrates the dangers of a food system controlled by powerful corporations that don't want you to see, to think about or to criticize how our food is made. The film reveals how complicated and compromised the once simple process of growing crops and raising livestock to feed our selves and our families has become. But, it also reminds us that despite

what appears to be at times a hopeless situation, each of us still has the ability to vote on this issue every day – at breakfast, lunch and dinner.⁴

So where do we go from here? We do what Jews have always done – go back to the basics, ask the questions, and create an opinion that reflects all information, our ultimate purpose in life, and respect for ourselves, our neighbors, the strangers in our midst, the animals and plants with whom we were created, and the planet on which we live.

The Locavore Movement has created some interesting guidelines for Eating Well, beginning with buying local. When you buy local, you eat in season foods without harming the environment to get them to you. You can even join a CSA, a community supported agriculture, where you join to support a local farmer, and receive locally grown food in return.

1. And if not **LOCALLY PRODUCED**, then Organic. This is one of the most readily available alternatives in the market and making this choice protects the environment and your body from harsh chemicals and hormones.
2. If not **ORGANIC**, then Family farm. When faced with Kraft or Cabot cheeses, Cabot, a dairy co-op in Vermont, is the better choice. Supporting family farms helps to keep food processing decisions out of the hands of corporate conglomeration.
3. If not **FAMILY FARM**, then Local business. Basics like coffee and bread make buying local difficult. Try a local coffee shop or bakery to keep your food dollar close to home.
4. If not a **LOCAL BUSINESS**, then Terroir, which means 'taste of the Earth'. Purchase foods famous for the region they are grown in and support the agriculture that produces your favorite non-local foods such as Brie cheese from Brie, France or Parmesan cheese from Parma, Italy.
5. Hit the farmers' market before the supermarket. Plan your meal around local ingredients you find at the market.
6. Branch out. Maybe your usual food repertoire could use some fresh ideas. The farmers' market provides a perfect chance to try a new ingredient when it's in season, and lets you talk to its grower to find out the best way to prepare your new food.
7. Feed the freezer. Can't cook every night? Worried about your fresh produce going bad? It's easy. Make lasagna with local tomatoes or a soup packed with

⁴ From Food, Inc. Movie, Food, Inc. Book, and www.foodincmovie.com.

fresh veggies and freeze it! You can also make personal size meals for a brown bag lunch.⁵

And if, like our family, you find the costs to be overwhelming and perhaps prohibitive, then remember the theme of this morning's Torah portion – we have choices to make in our lives, each and every day, and let food be part of the choice process, not an automatic decision. Many of us might not want to spend twice the price for a gallon of organic milk, but many of us could eliminate the daily iced coffee from Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts and easily replace it with better choices. We do have choices. And the more this country buys organic, the less it will cost us. It is basic economics 101.

According to the web site The Daily Green, there are foods that we really should be buying organic, and there are foods that are not as high on the priority list, for the pesticides are not as dangerous. Among the foods you can buy conventional, if necessary, are onions, avocados, sweet corn, pineapple, mango, asparagus, sweet peas, kiwi, cabbage, eggplant, papaya, watermelon, broccoli, tomatoes and sweet potatoes.

However, the new dirty dozen, the foods we should most definitely eat organic because they have the highest pesticide residue include: meat (which I will come back to momentarily), eggs, milk, coffee, celery, peaches, strawberries, apples, blueberries, nectarines, bell peppers, spinach, kale, potatoes, cherries and grapes. And don't worry: you don't need to have a photographic mind to remember all of this. Next week's Temple email will have the links for both the Clean 15 and the Dirty Dozen, so you can do your own investigating, as well as a link to the text of this sermon.

Now, I need to spend just a moment on the topic of meat. If you have seen the movie Food, Inc., I suspect that, like our family, you have made a conscious decision to change your eating habits when it comes to eating meat, be it chicken, turkey, beef or beyond. And if you are reading any of the current literature out there, you have probably already reduced your intake of red meat. Or eliminated it. Here is what I can share with you. When I listened to Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, give his bi-annual sermon at the URJ convention last November in Toronto, I heard the message of: eat less red meat, and that is what the media picked up as well. It felt rather insignificant in the scheme of significant economic strife hitting our country and world, serious issues in Israel, and of course issues on the domestic front as well.

⁵ From www.locavores.com/home.

However, the message is not as simple as: eat less red meat. The message is: be responsible. Be responsible for the health of our selves as individuals, as well as our loved ones. Be responsible for the animals around us, and for the world we inhabit as guests. Be responsible for the people who are working so hard to give us healthy crops, sustainable food and relationships with our land. We have choices to make, and we need to be making wiser choices.

I mentioned earlier that I do believe this topic of food is connected to the overall concept of keeping kosher, and it is not nearly as black and white as we would like to think. For those who keep kosher in our community and in the greater community, choices are made. To what degree does someone keep kosher? Do they keep kosher at home or in restaurants as well. Do they make exceptions when visiting relatives or dear friends who may not keep kosher?

And for those who choose not to follow traditional laws of kashrut, how can we make decisions around food, Jewish decisions around food, that cause us to stop, and think and reflect BEFORE we put any food in our mouths? Can we begin to think about WHAT foods we are eating? Where they are coming from? How they are affecting our greater world? How the workers harvesting these foods are being treated?

Michael Pollan, one of the great writers and thinkers in the modern day area of food, wrote a very little book called Food Rules. It reminds me of Robert Fulghum's All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. Here are just a few of Pollan's rules:

1. Eat food.
2. Don't eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food.
3. Avoid food products containing ingredients that no ordinary human would keep in the pantry.
4. Avoid foods that have some form of sugar in the top three ingredients.
5. Avoid food products containing ingredients that a third-grader cannot pronounce.
6. Avoid food products that are pretending to be something they are not.
7. Shop the peripheries of the supermarket and stay out of the middle.

8. Eat only foods that will eventually rot.
9. Eat foods that have been cooked by humans.
10. Don't ingest foods made in places where everyone is required to wear a surgical cap.⁶

There is no reason that we Jews cannot find a new relationship with our food. Today, as we are fasting, allow ourselves some time to decide how we would like to create a new relationship with our food. If you choose to do so because you want to be healthier, terrific. If you choose to do so because you are concerned about the materials going into your body, great. If you choose to do so because you believe Jewish tradition requires of us to have more respect for plants, animals and our world, wonderful.

Whatever reason you find, embrace it. And as you begin to replenish your body with food at the end of THIS Yom Kippur, this day of fasting, may it be a new relationship with the food that enters our mouths. And let us begin to digest the issues of mindful eating, ethical agriculture and a sustainable future. There is nothing we do more than eat, and just as Jews have done for thousands of years, we must allow food to be a gateway to doing righteousness, helping the environment and helping others and ourselves. Perhaps by paying better attention to this relationship with food, we will ultimately be saving lives, and as we all know, *pikuach nefesh*, saving just one life, is as if you have saved the world.

Amen.

⁶ From Michael Pollan's Food Rules, Penguin Books, 2009.