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Kol Nidre – 5772

### Does it Matter What We Eat?

*Harry was walking down the street and stepped into a posh gourmet food shop. An impressive salesperson in a smart morning coat with tails approached him and politely asked, "Can I help you, Sir?"*

*"Yes," replied Harry, "I would like to buy a pound of lox."*

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

*"OK, a pound of smoked salmon, then."*

*"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 pate."*

*"Okay," said Harry, "A pound of pate then and I'd like you to deliver all of this to my house on Saturday."*

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

Why am I starting with a joke about food on Yom Kippur? As one of my teachers once said – a rabbi's job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable - so what better night to speak about food than at the beginning of a 24 hour period that asks us to abstain from our usual culinary delights. And since on Kol Nidre we should be nothing less than honest with ourselves, I for one cannot think of a better time to do some gut wrenching contemplation about our eating habits.

Let's be clear, I am not asking anyone to envision your bountiful break-fast table or to ponder certain delicacies that you may partake in that shouldn't be mentioned in *shul*. Rather, I am asking each of us to consider several very important questions about the food we eat.

I want us to ask ourselves: Does it matter what we eat? I want us to reflect on whether or not the food we choose to eat or not eat can change our lives? I want us to seriously consider whether or not our food choices can become a vehicle for collective social action and world change? I want us to wrestle with the issue of how as Reform Jews and as members of a Reform congregation, do we eat Jewishly?

You don't have to be a doctor or a nutritionist to know that eating is a biological necessity; however, we should know that from the start of Jewish history, our tradition has always seen the act of eating as more than just a bodily function. The laws of *kashrut* have always been there to instruct us that not only does

eating matter but it also matters what we eat. The practice of keeping kosher has traditionally imposed a level of sanctity upon the most elemental human necessity, transforming the physical act of eating into a spiritual act. Judaism has always made the distinction between food as purely nourishment for the body and food as nourishment to replenish the soul.

Nutritionist, Halé Sofia Schatz puts it this way: she says “We’ve all heard the expression “you are what you eat.” But what does this really mean? You eat a carrot, and you become a carrot? You eat junk food and you become junky? While all clichés contain a grain of truth, “you are what you eat” focuses only on the after-effects of food in your body.”

Schatz goes on to say, “In working with food and consciousness, I’ve discovered a subtle nuance to this familiar expression; that is people eat what they are. If they are stressed out all the time chances are you’re feeding yourself stressed-out, quick-grab foods with little vital nourishment. When we shift our way of thinking from “you are what you eat” to “you eat what you are” we see the latter involves awareness. It makes us stop and question who we really are. If we believe that we are spiritual beings, than we’re more likely to seek out nourishing foods that feed the shining life force that already exists within us.”<sup>1</sup>

I think Schatz is correct when she asserts we eat to nourish not only our physical selves, but also our emotional and spiritual selves. Intellectually, we know that food is our body’s fuel, and that our body signals its need for refueling by making us feel hungry. If we think about it, we may realize that healthier fuel would leave us feeling better, and too much unhealthy fuel leaves us feeling much worse. But in reality, as we know, we often eat for reasons far different from merely soothing hunger or feeding our bodies.<sup>2</sup>

Truth be told, I believe more deeply now than ever before that what we choose to eat cannot only change our lives but in many cases change the world. Food is so much more than just what our taste buds relay to our brain. Food is so much more than just the feeling we get when our bellies are full.

I thought Mark Bittman encapsulated the origins of our relationship with food beautifully in last week’s New York Times Magazine where he wrote:

*I grew up during a time when the awareness of the quality of food was practically nil. It is true that in the ‘50s and the ‘60s people still cooked, even if much of the food was “convenient,” like Jell-O mold or tuna tetrazzini. It’s also true that animals were raised on farms, most vegetables were seasonal and hyper processed junk hadn’t yet achieved domination. But back then we took the good stuff for granted and never thought it would get anything but better.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Halé Sofia Schatz. If Buddha Came to Dinner

<sup>2</sup> Food for Thought, Hazon’s Sourcebook on Jews, Food and Hunger

<sup>3</sup> Bittman, Mark, New York Times Magazine , October 2, 2011

While much has changed since the '50s and '60s in the way of food production and food consumption, what hasn't changed is that for many of us – in particular those of us in this room – we are still taking our abundant food source for granted. This is why we beat our chest and recite “*Al Cheit Shechatanu lefanecha* – The sin we have committed against You by gluttony.”

The fact is that as much as fasting afflicts our souls during Yom Kippur, overeating has become an even more serious affliction that so many people suffer from. Sadly as more Americans, especially young people, become overweight and with obesity at epidemic proportions, it becomes clear that physical health isn't enough of an impetus for people to make changes.

Our food socialization has led us to desire the huge portions served at many of the most popular restaurants and we have become used to the speed at which one can get a meal leading us down a path that is becoming harder and harder to reverse. Some may argue that there needs to be a shift in our awareness of health from only physical to the total person – body, heart, mind and soul. Only then can we make the connection that the food we ingest directly feeds all parts of ourselves, thereby profoundly influencing the quality of our lives.<sup>4</sup>

I want to take a few moments and talk about the issue of *kashrut*, of keeping *kosher*. As you know *kashrut* is one of the first things that people think about when they think of *Jews and food*. But the *kashrut* that most people think about, not eating shellfish or pork and ritually slaughtered meat, is one based in Jewish law and for almost all of us in this room these laws are not binding and therefore removed from our daily life. Yet, as we now live in an era of ecological and environmental food choices - organic labels, the slow food movement and farmers markets - the redefining of the concept of *kashrut* should not be absent from the lives of post modern Jews like ourselves.

When we make eating special it heightens our relationship with our Jewish conscience. But what happens when we allow eating to become mundane and we allow eating to lose its elevated state? Many of us grew up in an era when eating red meat, beef, was real luxury. There were special occasions that called for a roast, fancy restaurants that served prime rib, and occasionally mom would make steak. As the beef industry grew and fast food chains became more prevalent our taste for meat grew with its accessibility. We no longer needed to wait for Dad's birthday or a holiday to enjoy a juicy prime cut.

The fact is that meat consumption in North America has doubled in the last 50 years. But the problem is not just that we are eating more meat. The problem is that the current rate of meat consumption in North America will cause the deaths of an estimated 1.5 million Americans in the next decade, mainly from cancer and heart disease. Culinary indulgence of this kind disregards the Jewish

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<sup>4</sup> Halé Sofia Schatz. *If Buddha Came to Dinner*

teaching that, having been created in God's image, we are obligated to maintain our physical vigor so that we may bring honor to the Divine presence.

This statistic about our future health was so overwhelming that Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, proposed in his Biennial sermon in Toronto that the entire Reform Movement make a Jewish decision to significantly reduce the amount of red meat we eat.

The reality is there are many reasons people choose to eat little or no meat, including concern for animals, health, environmental issues, ethical concerns about commercial meat production, and many others. One piece of research that caught my eye was from Professor Gidon Eshel of the Bard Center who suggested that the effect of reducing our collective meat consumption by only 20% would be comparable to every American driving a Prius instead of a standard sedan. This 20% reduction is something that every one of us---every Jew, every family, every synagogue can do.

While this is not a sermon urging everyone to become a vegetarian, we all should know that within Jewish sources, there are some very vocal proponents of vegetarianism. I also don't want you to think that this is a sermon for asceticism because as we also know Judaism is not an ascetic tradition. The fact is there are many sources in Jewish tradition that clearly permit meat eating, especially for celebration. As the Torah says, "You shall rejoice in your Festival,"<sup>5</sup> meaning that we are to celebrate sacred occasions and take delight in eating.

With this said, I will tell you that this is a sermon that is strongly advising all of us to take Rabbi Yoffie's suggestion that Reform Jews eat less red meat. The reality is that we can easily make do with far less red meat in our diet. And contrary to what you might think, Jews are not obligated to eat brisket on Rosh Hashanah, break-fast, Passover or Shabbat.

From everything that I have read it seems clear that we and the planet would be better off if most of us ate less meat. Clearly whether you choose to eat meat is up to you, but either way, I believe Jewish tradition – a Reform interpretation of *kashrut* instructs us that meat consumption is something we should do thoughtfully and with full awareness.

I believe the decisions we make when it comes to what we eat and how our food is produced, however small or large they may seem, matter. While it is true that these decisions matter for our health, our environment and our economy these reasons are not enough. Our food decisions also have to matter for our souls.

I believe that when we become mindful and thankful about our food it becomes part of our sacred lives connecting us to our traditions and to our God. While it

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<sup>5</sup> Deut. 16:14

may afflict our taste buds I do believe we have the ability to alter our food socialization and begin to comfort our souls.

Rabbi Harold Schulweis, told the following story:

*Once around the third meal of Shabbat – seudat shlishit – the students of the Rebbe persisted in asking him to tell them where God is. The Rebbe remained silent but at last he recited the Motzi, the blessing over bread, and pointed to a loaf of bread on the table.*

Rabbi Schulweis inferred that the Rebbe was not talking about holy communion here – God incarnate in a wafer. He taught that the Rebbe had something else in mind when he pointed to the bread. Maybe the Rebbe meant to say: bread is the meeting point of God and human beings – a gift of God that is the work of human hands.

Or Rabbi Schulweis gleaned that the Rebbe was actually teaching that there is holiness in bread and for that matter food. The Rebbe was teaching that the Divine Presence lives in the texture of our everyday acts, and that even the most mundane task can be sanctified. Eating a piece of bread can possess the Divine as long as we elevate the act of eating by reciting blessings prior to and after every meal.

Let us be honest with ourselves for a moment - How many of us will leave the sanctuary tomorrow evening – after observing 24 hours of fasting – and forget to say motzi – forget to say thank you for the food we are to eat when we break fast?

We live in a time and in a place where we must force ourselves to appreciate that the emergence of food and drink from the earth is a wonder and a mystery; therefore, when we eat we ought to stand in awe before the work of God's hands. It is no accident that our tradition teaches that meals are profoundly important in creating and sustaining purposeful community. Judaism has always insisted that we be mindful, that we appreciate our food. Judaism has always insisted that we be mindful in the food we choose to eat and mindful of the blessings that come with our meals.

But did you know that social science underscores this very same belief? Did you know that the research shows that families, friends, spouses that eat together are healthier and happier. Did you know that when we eat alone, we are sorely tempted to focus on ourselves, away from the needs of others, away from the needs of community, away from God? Eating in loneliness allows us to drift away and our tradition reminds us that this is not our way.

Jewish custom teaches when we join together for a se'udah—a Jewish community meal—we open our minds and our hearts to other human beings, and

we draw God in, as a partner, to our sacred community. For thousands of years, the message of Jewish tradition has been to invite others to join you in festive meals and celebrations. Indeed, this is why for most of us, the seder, the Yom Kippur break-fast, and the Shabbat meal are among our most significant Jewish memories.

So here we are, Erev Yom Kippur, the start of our 24 hour fast and the rabbi has not stopped talking about food. I am sorry if I have caused your tummies to rumble, but I have been thinking about the sacredness of food and I want you to use these next 24 hours to do the same.

I want us to reclaim our right as Reform Jews to keep Kosher, elevating ourselves, our world, and our Judaism as we become mindful of the food we eat. I know it won't be easy and I am not suggesting that we change old habits all at once but as the great philosopher Franz Rosenzweig teaches the key, as always, is to begin with small steps<sup>6</sup>

Now usually I would conclude my Kol Nidre sermon by wishing you a *tzom kal* – an easy fast, but not tonight. Instead I will conclude this sermon by wishing you a mindful and meaningful fast.

Tonight I want to ask all of us to be mindful of our fast. I want us to be mindful of our fast in order that we are reminded of the sacredness of our food. I want us to be mindful of our fast so we learn to choose foods that are healthful for the whole person - for our body, heart, mind and soul. I want us to be mindful of our fast so that we remember that there are hungry people who fast daily, not because they choose to fast, but because they have no food. And I want us to be mindful of our fast so that we turn our physical hunger into a hunger that propels us to repair our world by bringing the Divine presence into all that we do.

I end with the words from our blessing after a meal – *Birkat Hamazon*:

*V'al hakol, Adonai Eloheinu anachnu modem lach  
um'varchim otach. Yitbarach shimcha  
b'fi chol chai tamid l'olam va-ed,  
kakatuv: V'achalta v'savata, uveirachta  
et Adonai Elohecha  
al haaretz hatovah asher natan lach,  
Baruch atah Adonai, al haaretz v'al hamazon.*

*For all this we thank You. Let Your blessings ever be on the lips of all who live,  
as it is written: "When you have eaten and are satisfied, give blessings to your*

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<sup>6</sup> - Franz Rosenzweig, "Towards a Renaissance of Jewish Learning" (1920)

*God who has given you this good earth." We bless You, O God, for the earth and for its sustenance.*

Shabbat Shalom and G'mar Chatimah Tova