

Yom Kippur Morning 5770 / 2009  
Congregation Beth Evergreen  
Rabbi Benjamin Arnold

### **“DON’T SuperSize Me! An Eco-Kosher Kaparah,”**

In the haftarah that Susie read, the prophet Isaiah feeds us the question:

“What good is our fasting? We have doubts.

Over the last ten days, I have considered the many reasons we cling to in order to avoid the issues we have with energy intake, especially food. Why should we use Jewish tradition to guide what, how, and with whom we eat (and fast, for that matter)? Why? The most common answer I hear is simply that no one ever tried to explain it to us, and if they did, the reasons given simply were not compelling. This was the impetus behind last night’s sermon – a sampling of *taamei hamitzvot*, possible explanations, from a values-based perspective for the traditional dietary laws.

But there is another complicating factor to consider, and the CBE *kashrut* Policy that I read last night alluded to it. Traditional *kashrut*, the kosher laws, are idiosyncratically Jewish! For some this is an attraction. For others, it’s a turn off. I get it. Some of us are just not interested in being *that* Jewish! And let’s face it, there is serious baggage there! Especially for the generation of Jews that came off the boat. They had enough to carry. The burden of two sets of dishes, one Jewish and one American, was just not worth it. If the word ‘kosher’ means ‘fit,’ then their version of being kosher was to do all they could to FIT IN, here in America. The rule-laden system of *kashrut* was just too bound up in the parochialism, tribalism, and excuses-to-be-persecuted, realities they were determined to leave behind when they came to the New World. No wonder a substantial percentage of those that managed to make it to these shores agreed: Best to leave the Jewish set of dishes in the old country!

This morning, I’d like to speak to this very real challenge. This kosher stuff, is it too Jewish? Too parochial? Too Old World in a New World? Too us-versus-them? And if so, what then?

Let’s ask Isaiah. Remember, we were asking, “Why bother fasting? God doesn’t seem to care if I eat or not? What good does it do?”

“I’ll tell you why it’s not working!” comes the prophet’s reply.  
 “Even as you fast, you engage in business as usual,  
 You’re still underpaying your employees!  
 Your fasting hasn’t placed a dent in the worry on your face,  
 The clenching of your teeth and fists, your fussing and fighting.  
 You cannot fast like that and expect it to have any lasting benefit  
 Any trace of holiness.  
 Is this the kind of fast worthy of Divine delight?  
 A fast merely to deprive one’s body...you call that a fast?

A worthwhile fast breaks the bonds of bad habits,  
 Frees us to make new choices, to end oppression.  
 It inspires the compassion that leads one to feed the hungry,  
 Clothe the naked, house the homeless,  
 Heal the sick,” *and insure the uninsured.*

(Loosely adapted from Joel Rosenberg’s translation in Kol Haneshamah, Isaiah 57-58)

Ok, I added that last part, but, you get the idea. Does this sound parochial to you? It does not say that we should fast so that fellow Jews get better salaries, food, housing, and healthcare. The concern is for everyone and anyone in need. The implications are universal, ...or the practice is insufficient. In other words, think globally, act Jewishly. Atonement or *kapparah* for all is achieved through *kedusha*, through our own unique customs and practices. We can’t escape our uniqueness. How and what we eat distinguishes us -- humans from animals, Jews from non-Jews. Who remembers the Lenny Bruce routines. Green Jello, goyish. White Bread, goyish. Some foods are Jewish, some, just are not. If Jewish culture survives, the difference will always be there. The question is whether or not the differences will have meaning. What is the meaning behind these distinctively Jewish customs, kosher feasts, fasting on Yom Kippur? Kaplan taught that the purpose of uniquely Jewish practices is to help us, as a people with a unique history become more fully human. He may have taken his cue from Isaiah. The end game of kashrut is just the opposite of parochialism, its universal.

It seems to me that these are the two main reasons why so many Jewish Americans tried to leave the kosher laws behind. In short, neither the explanations, nor the social implications fit. The rules separated us further from our new neighbors without reason.

Makes sense to me, why we let that ship sail. But we live in a different world now, a new, New World -- a global village; a very different dynamic with our non-Jewish neighbors; an intertwined international economy; (car alarms); a changing climate and an evolved environmental sensibility. Each of these new realities has enabled us to see our tradition, especially the system of *kashrut*, with new lenses. For me at least, these new

lenses make both the explanations and the social implications substantially more compelling.

But there is at least one more obstacle to overcome. It came up for AJ Jacobs during his “Year of Living Biblically.” In America, we really like having choices. The more choice the better, that’s the American motto, and it’s a belief driving the bulk of the opposition to reform in both the healthcare system and the financial markets. Who in their right mind would want to limit their choices? AJ writes about his attempts at living literally by the Book. And he is dumbfounded by the *shatnez* guy, Mr. Berkowitz, the orthodox thread checker. Every detail of his life is so regimented – what he can and cannot wear, how he puts on and ties his shoes, right then left, left, then right. So little room, it seems, for choice, so regimented and regulated a life. But he goes on to write:

“In retrospect ...I’m starting to think that it’s not completely insane. My dad always talked about how his hero Albert Einstein owned seven identical suits, so that he wouldn’t waste any neuronal activity on choosing what to wear. Similar idea.

In fact, its part of a bigger theme I’ve been mulling over: freedom *from* choice. I’d always been taught to fetishize freedom of choice. It’s the American way.

...But more and more I’m starting to see the beauty in a more rigid framework. The structure, the stable architecture of religion. My brother-in-law Eric [he writes] ...likes to lecture me about an experiment at a grocery store by researchers from Columbia and Stanford. They set up two tables offering free tastes; one had six flavors of jam, the other had twenty-four flavors of jam. Oddly, more people bought jam from the table with six flavors. Nearly ten times more people, in fact. The conclusion was that the big table was just too overwhelming, too many options.

The Bible takes away a lot of those options. What should I do on Friday night? Stay home with the family.”

What should I eat for lunch? Never mind, it’s Yom Kippur.

See that’s Yom Kippur, a day to experience the bliss of freedom *from* choice – free from food choices altogether. And it’s true, isn’t it? How often have you been overwhelmed by too much choice? It is not always in our best interest. And it seems clear now that too much freedom can have devastating consequences for the economy and the environment.

I am not advocating taking away anyone’s right or ability to choose. I am simply pointing out that there are advantages to choosing to limit ones choices. This is another benefit that *kashrut* has to offer, the option to limit our options – make the most of what

neuronal activity we've got left. Another impetus for following Marilyn's advice to us last night about carefully investing our lives, our time, and our money.

Now, back to our original questions: Why bother fasting? Why bother with dietary restrictions, beyond skewed body-image ideals? Objection #1: No one bothered to offer a compelling reason for it. Check. Objection #2: Too parochial, too ethnic. Check. Objection #3: Don't mess with my freedoms man! Check.

Ok, Any others. What did I miss?

No? Any time left before the Yom Kippur hike and yoga? Alright, with the time remaining, let's speculate a bit. What would an Eco-Kosher Rule Book look like? Here they come, Rabbi Jamie's six starter rules for an eco-kosher congregation, a modest but significant contribution to a sustainable planet:

**Rule #1:** It cannot and will **not be an All-or-Nothing Deal** – A Ladder between floors, not an Elevator. But neither will it be anything goes, pick and choose

**Rule #2:** It would hold **vegetarianism as an ideal** – with the expectation that there will be compromises, but conscientious ones. Because, if the concern about the suffering of animals and the taking of lives is not enough, consider the environmental impact. According to the Hazon website, 25% to 37% of all green house gas emissions in the US are a direct result of our system of food production, and the vast majority of that energy is directed towards the meat industry, raising cattle for food. If you are at all concerned about global climate change, eating is “the one thing we all do that has the most far reaching, negative ecological consequences.” We can start by trying to limit the amount of meat we eat. There are lots of options: Go biblical and cut out pork and shellfish, maybe even cheeseburgers; only buy meat if it's kosher, or free-range, grass-fed locally, and organic; only eat fish; or only eat meat on Shabbat and holidays.

**Rule #3:** To honor our traditions of hospitality, diversity, and inclusivity, our dietary practices should **draw us closer together** and honor our interdependence. We can continue to do this through shared meals spiced with study and song; home-deliveries; food drives; not letting regulations overshadow loving-kindness; offering encouragement without embarrassment. What we do at home, what we do here, and what we do in the homes or restaurants of our neighbors may differ. Rabbi Kaplan offered that option decades ago. But our reasons for such compromises shouldn't stop with convenience, indifference, great taste, or less filling. “To each their own” is not the best recipe for

building community. Rule #3 seeks a better one by consensus building replacing freedom from structure with real respect for disciplines and differences.

**Rule #4: Minimize waste.** Step One: “Don’t Super size me!” I won’t take more than I really need. The concept of *b’al tashchit*, ‘do not waste’ goes back to the Bible, but it is the centerpiece of the eco-kashrut that Rami Shapiro writes about in his book about Ten core spiritual practices for our time, Minyan. And according to Rami the four core-principals of eco-kashrut are as follows: a) against waste, b) against unnecessary destruction, c) against spoiling food, and d) the fourth, is respect – respect for the body, for nature, and for animals. These four principles makes a strong case for reusable, recyclable or compostable cutlery, plates, tablecloths, and napkins, as well as food packaging – here and at home. Reuse and recycle, in addition to being a modest consumer – taking only what we need, rather than all we can have.

**Rule #5: Local, Organic, and Fair Fare.** When possible, we should know from whence comes our food and avoid contaminants, both chemical pesticides as well as commercial parasites – such as companies that cut corners which end up undervaluing, endangering or oppressing human and environmental resources. And let’s steer clear of highly processed foods. One study found that some commercial sauces contained a vegetable content as low as 8%. This spring Marti organized a coop for distributing local, organic produce, not just because it’s good stuff and convenient, but the company we use tithes and CBE gets a percentage of whatever we spend. Once a week, the local organic produce comes to your house; well actually our house, so you’d have to swing by to pick up your box, but it beats combing through the produce section at the Supermarket and having no idea what kind of social injustice or carbon footprint you’ll be paying for. Challah and hamentashen from Alpine Pastries, Honey Smoked salmon from the Mason’s, Produce from Farmer’s Market and the CBE Coop, these are local, organic, fair and eco-kosher fare.

**Rule #6: Hodaah and Oneg, Gratitude and Joy.** This is the message of Sukkot and Simchat Torah, and knowing that, I know you will want to join us for the 8-day finale of these high Holidays. But even when it’s not the Feast of Booths, our meals together should be filled us with gratitude and joy – *ach sameach*, only joy. Joy prompted by blessings, singing, and the sharing of good, tasty recipes. If we’re not enjoying the process of eating and drinking, we’re not earning a CBE eco-kosher certification. Here at

Beth Evergreen, should even be having fun fasting. Last year, didn't we commit to a year of FUN-raising? Right, no financial appeal at high holidays last year, strictly fun-raising. Well, this year we up the ante. Enjoying food is easy. Let's try to have fun raising funds, cooking, and cleaning! Hey at our best, we even put the f-u-n back in funeral. Fun with food should be a given!

There they are, six guiding rules for an eco-kosher CBE:

- 1) Not all or nothing
- 2) A sliding scale or ladder of optimal practices with vegetarian as the ideal
- 3) Community Building
- 4) Not wasteful
- 5) Local, organic and fair
- 6) Fun!

Ok, I'm just about done.

But before we open up the Ark again and close the door on this conversation, I want to offer a one word mantra that I think sums it all up, all these rules, explanations, and social implications. Those of you here last year have heard it before. Think back to last Yom Kippur, when we spoke about the mezuzah, the encased scroll traditionally fixed to the doorframes of Jewish homes. One of God's names adorns most *mezuzot*, *Shaddai*. Remember how we translated that name. *Sheh-Dai*, [That is] Just Enough. A reminder each time we enter our homes that there is enough to go around. As one commentator in the prayerbook suggests, there is enough abundance to satisfy our need, but not our greed. This name, this mantra, should greet us at the door when we come home. Just enough! Not too little, not too much, *shvil hazahav* -- taking from our refrigerators and our planet just enough, not more, not less.

"This mantra, "Just Enough!" takes our personal and communal food ethics into the public domain. This commitment to minimize waste and recognize our interdependence is too valuable to hide away in our closets or arks, or in our private kitchens. This year think of the mezuzah when you leave home and head out into the world. This year let your dietary discipline have the global impact it was meant to have. Give your feasting and your fasting added meaning by letting it ripple into a world in need of repair. In our receiving, let us give something back to a planet and her inhabitants in need of *kavod* and care. Only then will we have responded to Isaiah's words. Only then will our attempts at

*kedusha* achieve true *kapparah* -- only then will our distinctively Jewish customs approach the goal of universal atonement.

May these aspirations and intentions ease your hunger pains today and fill the weeks and months ahead with hope and meaning, discipline and determination, joy and pleasure. *Tzom kal. UGmar Hatimah Tovah.*