

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770
Congregation Beth Evergreen
Rabbi Benjamin Arnold

“The Gastronomic Jew: Is it Kosher?”
Primary *Midah*: Awareness

I was twelve years old. Like most adolescent boys, I had a very healthy appetite. I have this very clear memory of sitting with my dad at the kitchen table. I was probably snacking on a micro-waved bologna and cheese sandwich, on a bagel – my preferred method of avoiding preparing for my bar mitzvah. Mouth full, I turned to my dad and declared with a snicker, “I could never fully adopt a religion that restricted my eating habits.” (Remember that, Dad?) As it turns out, I would eventually, literally and figuratively, EAT THOSE WORDS.

I have unabashedly adopted a religious path that has a whole lot to say about food – not just about what I should and should not eat, but that too. Jewish religion, like Jewish culture, is obsessed with food to such a degree that Jews, it has been claimed, are as neurotic about food as Catholics are about sex! And it is not just that there always has to be food at a Jewish event, or that the majority of our holiday rituals can be distilled down to the declaration, “They tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat!” The Jewish obsession with food goes to very roots of our faith – mythical roots, historical roots, legal roots, geographical and moral roots. The Jewish obsession is so deeply rooted that it transcends our differences.

Jews come in many flavors. There are the ideological categories: reform, orthodox, conservative, Reconstructionist, humanist, renewal, messianic. There are also the dispositional distinctions: 1) religious (theist or humanist), 2) secular, and 3) gastronomic! Allow me to explain: If you are a **religious Jew**, it means you strive to love God (or godliness) heart and soul, in thought and deed. The **secular Jew** loves to avoid (and sometimes bemoan) all the trappings of God and religion. And then there are the **Gastronomic Jews** – those of us who love, *bkhol levav’cha...*, with our whole heart, soul, and body ...a good pastrami on rye, fresh lox adorning an oversized bagel, a sweet kugel not reserved for dessert, and, of course, grandma’s recipe for matzoh ball soup.

The thing about gastronomic Judaism, is that you can be a secular gastronomic Jew, or a religious gastronomic Jew. Heck, you can even be a non-Jewish gastronomic Jew! Maybe, diverse as we are, we could all be gastronomic Jews. Warning label: It might be tasty, but it won't be easy.

The topic for the evening, and in fact for the High Holiday season: Food. Because, in a very real way, we are what (and how) we eat – not just as individuals, but as a community, as a people, as a religion, and as a nation.

When I was twelve, it is true, I wanted no part of it. But, now, perhaps more than even before, I am convinced that if religious life has something of lasting value to contribute, than it must help us to become more conscious, more conscious consumers -- to learn to eat with awareness, gratitude, justice, and *kavod* (respect for life). And yes, though I can see the face of that 12-year old me cringe when I say it, we need a religion that puts some moral restraints on our eating habits.

But first, some history. How did food assume such a central pace in Jewish collective consciousness? Where did it start?

Generation One, Eden: There is a certain forbidden fruit tree placed in the center of the Garden of Eden, source of the first marital disputes – Adam: “She made me eat it.” Eve: “No I didn't. It was the snake.” Eve: “Oh, I'm sorry, were you saving that for God?” He blames it on her cooking, and she on “the snake,” and the snake plays the fool. So it begins. But, the food of the first garden did more than beget arguments, it bestowed knowledge. In the words of the serpent, it made the consumer “like unto the gods, discerning good and evil,” granting the power of self-awareness, choice, and moral autonomy. The fruit of this tree, in the words of science, enlarged the frontal lobe of the human brain and distinguished us as a species. Food = knowledge. Food = autonomy, the ability to break ‘rules;’ and food = a blessing and a curse. The blessing is the awareness, or the capacity for it. The curse is two-fold. For mothers -- the pain associated with pushing that enlarged frontal love through the birth canal. For all of us, money/bread/food would no longer simply grow on trees. Ever since, we would have to

grow food ourselves “with the sweat of our brow.” The Torah begins with a lesson in gratitude: the harder we have work for it, the more we are likely to appreciate the “fruits” of our labors.

Next Generation, Cain and Abel -- two brothers to whom Torah traces the origins of all sibling rivalry. And what did they fight over? Cain, the tiller of soil, and Abel, the herder of sheep-and-goats. Each brings, from the fruits of their labors, an offering to God. Then the jealousy sets in. Cain: “Hey! How come God likes your barbeque better than my veggie stir fry.” Abel’s not-so-famous last words: “Your’s looks nice enough, but ‘Where’s the beef?’” The results of the first ‘Iron Chef’ cooking contest = the winner ends up in a royal stew; Food = the central ingredient in the Biblical plotline.

Generation #10, Noah: Saving each species of animal from a great flood is primarily a lesson in *kvod habriyot*, respect for all living beings, but the story gets even more interesting after the flood. Noah starts out as righteous man, but after that many days at sea, not even he could resist the temptations of the fruit of the vine. Sailors and their alcohol! Your college roommate was not the first character to drink too much and pass out naked in his tent. His disgrace prompts him to pronounce a curse to which the scripture traces the origins of all tribal strife – between Shem and Canaan, Israel and Philistines, Zionists and Palestinians. After 10 generations and a flood, Food and Drink still figure prominently in our literary past.

Generations 30 and 40: Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, more of the same: The transitions traced from tribe to nation in Torah are driven by a bi-polar path from feast to famine and back again. Husband and wife, Brothers and sister, spouses and siblings alike have their comings and goings determined by famines and feasts. It all revolves around food.

On the one hand, this makes sense. After all, we are still human, creatures of the earth. Like the animals, we need food to survive. It is a basic necessity. On the other hand, we do not eat just to survive – who watches those cooking contest shows? The scoring categories are creativity, taste, and presentation, right? Longevity of the consumer is not on the list. This is way beyond survival. In fact, this way of relating to food may be what separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom. I recently heard an

anthropologists argue that the ability to cook food best explains how we made the evolutionary step from ape to human, that our ability to cook makes us uniquely human. Consider the inverse relationship between brain size and teeth size. Before the invention of the oven, we needed those big teeth. Once we started barbecuing, we traded in our overbite for an oversized frontal lobe ...oh, and the incumbent pain in childbirth, or so I've heard. The missing link in the evolutionary chain from ape to human, whether the 'oven theory' or the 'theory of optimal foraging,' it's about food.

If there is any truth to this, then science and theology agree on these three points at least:

- 1) whether we go back about 1 million years in search of a missing link or to the Garden of Eden, it is still all about food.
- 2) our humanity is inextricably linked to how we acquire, prepare, consume, and share food.

And another point of intersection:

- 3) The bi-polar swings between feast and famine, seem, if anything, to be growing worse, not better.

First the dark side, the *al chets*:

a) Individually – A straw poll, raise your hand if your eating habits top your list of vices. Me too. Few of us have to worry about having access to food, but like Adam and Eve the ease of access comes with curses of its own. From anorexia to severe obesity, we avoid food or over eat in an attempt to feed emotional needs rather than physical and spiritual ones. We diet to look better, instead of to be better! And if we really want to know what is driving health care costs out of control consult a dietitian not an economist.

b) Couples, families, and co-workers are not eating together anymore.

c) Communally, fending for our selves is more common than feeding our neighbor.

d) Nationally, not only are we the most obese nation in the world, also produce the most waste, by far, waste – of food and food packaging; and American

cuisine is a joke in Europe – McDonalds, pizza and Coke define our diets to the global market.

e) And Globally, as of this summer, 1 billion people in the world, 1/6th of the current human population suffers from hunger every day, some 28 million Americans used food stamps last year. And yet those Americans who aren't starving are consuming nearly 1/3 of the world's food. A minority of the world's population is consuming the majority of its yield. Not only is it unjust, it is a social disease with a remedy. We currently produce enough food to feed everyone, and can make enough for twice the current human population, 12 billion people.

The debate about the health care system in the US continues. But seen in a global context, the arguments about whether or not to expand a 'public option' miss the boat. 58% of all deaths between 2001 and 2004, 60 % of child deaths globally can be attributed to the same cause. According to the World Health Organization, the greatest threat to public health across the globe is not H1N1, HIV, or WMDs. It is malnutrition and hunger. Now that's what I call a real, healthcare crises.

For us to ignore such world-wide a crisis – Not Kosher. For us to minimize the negative global impact of America's uses and abuses of food and other natural resources – not kosher. How many of you could articulate the CBE Kashrut policy – I have seen some of those potluck dishes and taken out the trash afterwards – not kosher! The way food functions in our families, not so kosher. And our individual relationships with food, let's face it, not so kosher! I eat too quickly. What's your *treif* behavior?

And when I say "Not kosher," I am not leaning on ritual distinctions for their own sake – not nitpicking over *heckshers*, salting techniques, mixtures of meat and milk, separate dishes. Think of "not Kosher" as not conscientious, not mindful, not deliberate, not just or sustainable. Not physically, emotionally, morally, intellectual fit. The word kosher/*kasher*, means, fit. The Kosher health care plan is a fitness plan of wellbeing, balance and awareness. Rethinking *kashrut*, the question of "Is it Kosher?" in this light has a name coined by Reb Zalman. It is called eco-kosher. If we are going to truly embrace our status as gastronomic Jews, then we are going to have to learn about and wrestle with *kashrut* – traditional *kashrut* and *eco-kashrut*.

Because, we do have a crisis on our hands. And the first step is to become aware of it. Other wise we are left with just the curses of what we consume.

Another moment from my youth comes to mind. Every time my brother and I went down to Florida to visit my grandfather *alav hashalom*, he took us to Toys R Us. “Any toy you want! Go for it.” Ah, the bliss of the years when the choice was hard because each toy looked more wondrous than the next. But I also remember, and it must have also been when I was about 12 years old, when the choice was hard because all I saw were shelves and shelves of junk. Well, a few years ago, I had the same realization, this time in the King Soopers – rows and rows of junk, junk food. Awareness.

And here we turn from vices to virtues, al Mitzvot ve’avadot: (cards)

<u>Eco-Kashrut: Eating our Way to Sustainable Bliss</u>		
A DIET TO BALANCE SELF, HOME, COMMUNITY, HUMANITY, ECOSYSTEM, EARTH		
<i>Midah / Value</i>	<i>Mitzvah / Implementation</i>	<i>Avodah / Ritual</i>
<i>Kivun HaDaat / Awareness</i> <i>Kavod / Respect</i>	Plan, Purchase, Prep Mindfully Care for Body, Earth, Life	Before / After Blessings Grow Garden, Buy Local
<i>Hesed / Love</i> <i>Kedusha / Holiness</i>	Lovingly Prepare to Share a Meal Set Aside Time to Eat	Invite Shabbat Guests Fix Sacred Mealtimes
<i>Perishut / Abstinence</i> <i>Shvil HaZahav / Moderation</i>	Make List of ‘Forbidden Foods’ Modest Portions, Minimal Waste	‘Junk’ Food Fast The ‘Third Meal’
<i>Oneg / Pleasure</i> <i>Simchah / Joy</i>	Enjoy Eating, Celebrate Taste Make Mealtime Serious Fun	Shabbat Indulgence Tell Daily Dinner Joke

These are some of values with which we can infuse our eating habits with meaning, with holiness. In the holiday gatherings ahead, we will consider each of them: look at *kavod v’hesed*, abstinence and moderation, *oneg and simchah*. Tonight I enjoin you to help me, my family, our community, our country make these ideals active ingredients in the meals we prepare, for ourselves and one another, in the coming year. And we start with ‘Awareness’ – *hayom harat olam*, today the world is reconceived.

Think about it. How much do you know about what you ate earlier today? this week? This past year? Do you know where it came from? Who grew it? Who profited and who was exploited by its sale? How often do you ask yourself: How does it

contribute to my fitness? My family's fitness? Our community's? Our nation? Our planet?

Our awareness, our ability to cook, our ability to transform food into thought, this is what makes us distinctly human, unique among the life forms on earth. We can't escape it. We are gastronomic creatures. Let's be mindful ones.

And if there is a single question I associate with Rosh Hashanah, than this is it: On this day we ask ourselves, what is my place in Creation? For what was I given life? What is the purpose of humankind and how can we align our lives with that purpose? How do we FIT in? OK so that is a lot of questions...but they are all related.

And in responding to them, modern science and ancestral religion once again share a common ground. To effectively answer such questions we must make better choices about what and how we eat, and how we ensure that others have enough to eat.

Our moral and physical fitness depends upon our ability to awaken our awareness in order to stay the famine in the land. Only with awareness can we return, and bring others, gastronomic Jews and non-Jews alike, to a land flowing with milk and honey. It can be done. As Gastro-Jews and Gastro-Humans – it is our job to make it happen, to make this coming year (and all subsequent ones) flow-over with promise, nourishment and sweetness for one and all.

And it all starts with a bracha.

L'Shanah Tovah Um'Tukah

[Song]

KAVANNAH FOR KIDDUSH:

Now we put into practice the ideals described earlier. Now, we reconsider why we pause before sipping the wine – to fully appreciate this wine, this moment, this new year. The *brachah*, the Kiddush is our reminder to drink (and eat) with AWARENESS. Awareness that this day, like this wine is more than nourishment. It is a taste of nature itself, a taste of creation as it was in the beginning, pure and pristine and perfect, whole and holy. And with this unique gift of awareness and wisdom, we can transcend our natures as we employ them – to elevate the mundane act of eating something more – and act of remembrance – of who we are and who we are meant to become, of our bondage to lesser habits and our freedom to choose a better ones; of our connectedness to one another, to the earth, the dirt, the rain, the air, the sun, the seed and the vine, the vineyard and its keeper, the barrel maker and distributor and retailer, the artists and writers that crafted labels, reviews and publicity, the driver and the salesclerk, the hungry and the thirsty, the sacred holy and the yet to be made so, and One that connects us all – L'Chaim, to life.

With memory and love, awareness and action, let us, with one Kiddush prayer, bless both the 7th day and the onset of the 7th month and everything in between. Please rise.
Vay'chulu pg. 132 then P. 1198