

Rosh Hashanah, Day 1, 5770
Congregation Beth Evergreen
Rabbi Benjamin Arnold

“Searching for the Holy Grill: Food, Fitness, Family, Dysfunction...and Holiness”
Primary midot: *Kavod, Hesed, and Kedushah*

Earlier in the service I offered a personalized translation of the Shema v’ahavta prayer. After Hear O Israel...“**And should you happen to love [Adonai, your God] with all your heart, soul, bodily strength and net worth...well, then use your words, speak them, today, everyday, repeat them, especially to your children, speak those words...**”

This prayer at the heart of all our services is like a manual for giving and receiving love – a pretty good one too. But it is missing something. Think about it? How do we display love and respect? When do we feel most loved?

Yes, like the text says, we speak these words and write them out and post them – you may remember the conversation we had last year about the mezuzah. Words have power, spoken and inscribed. But there is something else that is arguably even more potent, and certainly more substantial -- food. I think of the lyrics of Malvina Reynolds, “If you love me if you love, love, love me, plant a rose for me, and if you think you’ll love me for a long, long time, plant an apple tree.” Sometimes words are not enough.

It is an old debate actually: *say* you love me, or *plant* a tree? Which would you prefer? Which is more important: an Ethics of Speech or an ethics of Eating? The Christian Testament records the debate between Jesus and the formally elected Pharisees. When his disciples are accused of eating un-tithed fruits, Jesus defends them saying, “It is not what goes in the mouth that taints us so much as what comes out.” The later Church interpreted this passage to signal the end of a need to follow the kosher dietary laws. But I think Jesus was simply trying the right an imbalance of priorities, restoring the importance of the ethics of speech to its rightful place. And I think Judaism has made this shift, maybe too well. Just look ahead in the *Mahzor* to the Yom Kippur liturgy, the confessionals. The *ashamnus* and *al chets* are dominated by a concern about the misuse of language and the spoken words.

But the reverse is likewise true: The food that goes in the mouth is at least as morally weighted as the words that go out. Historians (and today's haftarah) remind us that *spoken* offerings of praise, petition, and thanksgiving were a fallback plan. Before that, there were sacrifices, mostly animal, but also grains, fruits, oils and spices. According to ancient rite, the gods were nourished by the smoke that wafted heavenward from the altar that stood in the Temple; so precious, that altar – let's call it the Holy Grill, (that is grill, not grail). Well, the Holy Grill is lost and with it, for many of us, the belief in a God that delights in nor demands the air pollutants of the open-pit BBQ. For centuries we have relied on the belief that words will suffice as vehicles for extending our love for the Divine. In the absence of the proper real-estate, utensils, and grill, words served as a substitute – like having to use vegetable oil instead of butter since the dairy farm got shut down. This morning I invite you to join me on a quest for the Holy Grill, a search for the tools needed to give and receive love with food.

We know the power of words. But food has the power not just to sustain our bodies, but also our relationships, especially with those closest to us. Here's the essential question: What role does food play in our home-life? How does the way we acquire, prepare, consume and clean up from meals at home impact our marriages, our families -- the ability to give and receive love with those closest to us?

First let's consider some of the ways that household eating habits are **Life-Affirming**.

- When we prepare a meal for a sick family member or friend;
- When we prepare and share comfort food after a hard day;
- When we stop and appreciate one-another, listen to daily trials and triumphs
- When we spice school lunches with treats and loving notes;
- When we bake a cake for a birthday boy or girl.

At our best, food is a vehicle for loving, comforting, respecting, celebrating, healing, and sharing. In the Torah readings today, Abraham too shows his love for Hagar by providing her with food and water, even if it would not protect her from the desert. In the haftarah, Elkanah and Hannah bring offerings to the Temple to show their love of

God, and after fasting and prayer and finally fertility, they return with offerings of gratitude and vow fulfillment.

And we can assume that Israel learned this trick, love through food, from God directly. God provides food for Adam in the garden and for the Israelites in the desert; God loves Ishmael and Hagar by revealing the well that was there all along. Such acts the prophets liken to a mother nursing her young. Or, just as resonant a simile for many in this room: God's love for us is like that of a caring child nursing an aging parent. We, like God, show love respect, and nurturance by feeding one another.

Unfortunately we also use food for less noble, loving and respectful purposes, especially in our home and family life. Mealtime can also convey anger, mistrust, doubt, and neglect. How we eat can just as easily habitualize selfishness, greed, gluttony and indifference instead of *kavod* and *hesed*.

Now, make a mental list. What are some of our **negative**, unhealthy family eating habits? [Invite responses.] Think of Max, sent to bed without his supper, left to face the wild things by himself. We also use food as form of punishment or blackmail. Sometimes how we handle meals conveys neglect. We use food to feed power trips, fears, inadequacies, and lesser appetites. Not Kosher! The other thing food does at mealtime to establish and reinforce hierarchies, patriarch/matriarch status, sibling status? Think of the lentils and later the venison with which Jacob swindled his brother Esau's birthright and blessing.

What do you think? A meal at home -- Is it ever neutral?

One thing is for sure, at least in my house: we could stand to do with more of the former, life-affirming, love-affirming, ways with food – even when we are eating alone. We can all stand to bring more *kavod* and *hesed* to our mealtimes. This is the foundation, and a strong one.

But we can do even better than that. *Hesed* and *kavod* – servings of love and respect may be the main course, but, don't forget about dessert. According to the Torah, the only explicit reason given for all the dietary guidance it provides is this: "I am holy and you shall be holy." Holiness. Time for a short Hebrew lesson. The expression of the day: ***Mikdash Me'at***. *Mikdash* means 'holy place,' like the portable Tabernacle or the Temple Jerusalem and its Holy Grill. It is a place where we can directly access the

Divine Presence. Well, when the Grill was stolen and the Jerusalem Temple Destroyed, the sages (in perhaps the most radically democratic act of that era) dedicated a new sanctuary, one that can be found in every home.

The second word, *me'at*, means 'miniature.' A *mikdash me'at* is literally a small sanctuary, a portable holy place. In Judaism, the *mikdash me'at* is each and every home. To paraphrase the Talmud, "When the Temple was destroyed the altar moved from the *Beit Hamikdash* in Jerusalem to the dining room table in every Jewish home and the meal-makers became our priests and priestesses." This is why the home-based rituals of the Passover seder and Shabbat meals assume an equally sacred status as the services in the synagogue. Both are *Mikd'shei Me'at*. My message today is essentially this: This year, let's bring home the Holy Grill.

We do not need to wait for Pesach to make mealtime sacred! And we do not need to go off on some crusade in the Middle East to find this lost Grill. Remember that we have been endowed by our creator with life, liberty and *the ability to eat with intention*. What a gift, to have the capacity to take something so ordinary and mundane like food, and to make it holy! Think of it as a map in your pursuit of happiness.

So let's take a minute to brainstorm. How do we construct a *mikdash me'at* [sacred space] in our kitchens and dining rooms?

- not answer the phone during dinner;
- eat together;
- eat in appreciative silence,
- ...say a blessing/grace, the *motzi*.

This Holy Grill is not far off in heaven or entombed in some esoteric religious rite. With these simple acts we restore it to our table and build a *mikdash me'at* in our homes.

Before continuing with the service and then sharing a meal here together, let's look more closely at one of those examples. The **Motzi** is one of the first *brachas* [blessings] taught in Hebrew schools all over. Nod if you know the *motzi*? OK. Let's take a few minutes to get to know her better. First a question about food blessings in general, then a question specific to the blessing over bread, the *motzi*. Here's the first question: **How does the *brachah* change the act of eating?**

- a. Gives it higher purpose, beyond mere survival
 - i. Eat with awareness
 - ii. Eat with gratitude, receive, rather than take
 - iii. Affirm our interconnectedness – *bein adAm la'adam/makom* (between human and God/place/Earth in one expression)
 - iv. Encourages eating together, bonding activity
 1. My church-going grandpa used to say grace before every meal and we'd hold hands around the table
 2. my son came home from camp with new songs for mealtime and new friends

As the blessing over bread, it is an unusual blessing. The Kiddush, for example blesses the Creator for the “fruit of the vine.” Indeed, the fruit used to make wine grows on the vine. Odd then that *hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz*, does not say thanks for the *grain* of the earth. *Lechem* means bread not grain. **Why does it say ‘Bread from earth, not grain from the earth?’** So I looked it up. Abraham Joshua Heschel explains that this way we acknowledge the blessings of the earth’s fertility *and* human technology. The *motzi* prayer blesses the Force/Power/Process that makes possible both nature and civilization. Arthur Waskow has taught that this unique formula highlights true partnership between *adAm* and *adamah*, human and humus, earth and earthling! It honors both man-made and God-made contributions. The blessing is a daily reminder of our unique human faculties, purposes, and responsibilities. *Dvar Aher*, one more, from Kabbalah. You game? Nahman of Bratzlav notes the similarities between the Hebrew words for ‘bread’ (לחם) and ‘the wisdom’ (החכמה) – both have the numerical value of 78. With a simple blessing, the meal becomes a vehicle for receiving and channeling Divine Wisdom. See I told you, a HOLY GRILL!

So, how does food function in our home life? Today, on the Day of Remembrance, *yom hazikaron*, today it is upon us to internalize and actualize...

- the importance of food in home/family life;
- That what we put into and receive from mealtime is rarely neutral

- Show judgment, enforce power differential, or...
- Communicate respect, love and nurturance
- Strengthen bonds, shared identity
- That we can infuse eating with holiness – re-make our tables into altars and our kitchens into sanctuaries.

When we recite blessings like the *motzi*, we infuse eating with ethics and ideals, Godliness. AS Rabbi Shimon taught, “When three sit together and things of Torah are shared, it is as if they ate at the Table of God [*Makom*].” (Mishnah *Pirkei Avot* 3:4)

When we make mealtime an opportunity to serve up healthy doses of *kavod*, *hesed* and *kedusha* – we will have remade our table into altars and prepared our meals atop our very own, home-made, Holy Grill. Now that is what I call a kosher kitchen!

May you be blessed with a table set with *kavod*, *hesed* and holiness, sweetness and life for this new year -- Thank you and *L'Shanah Tovah*.

Sketch of Sermon:

- II. Central Role for Food**
 - a. last night – centrality of food for humanity
 - b. Tonight – role in the home / family
- III. How do we show love and respect?**
 - a. Words
 - b. Love
- IV. Are meals ever neutral?**
 - a. Life Affirming/dairy: love, nurturance, celebration, together time
 - b. Life Taking/meat: power trips, blackmail, feed fears/lesser appetites
 - c. Neutral: ?? disciplinary tool, reward obedience, punish rebellion, establish sibling status
- V. Mikdash Me'at – can something so ordinary be holy?**
 - a. Dining room table as the new altar, homemaker as the new priest/ess
 - b. Kosher = Keshet, food as a primary link to God, godliness
 - c. Mealtime as SACRED! Not answer phone, etc.
- VI. Hamotzi – How does the brachah change the act of eating?**
 - a. Gives it higher purpose, beyond mere survival
 - i. Eat with awareness
 - ii. Eat with gratitude, receive rather than take
 - iii. Affirm our interconnectedness
 - iv. Encourages eating together, bonding activity
 - b. Unusual blessing – Bread from the earth, not grain? Fruit of the vine
 - i. Bless Force/Power/pattern/Process that makes possible both nature and civilization (AJ Heschel);
 - ii. partnership between adam and adamah!
 - iii. Honor both man-made and God-made contributions
 - iv. Reminder of our unique human faculties, purposes
 - v. Kavod for self and world in one word/act
- VII. Siyum – How does food function in your home life?**
 - a. Importance of food in home/family life
 - b. Shared meals are rarely neutral
 - i. Show judgment, power differential
 - ii. Communicate respect, love and nurturance
 - iii. Strengthen bonds, shared identity,
 - c. Infusing eating with holiness – table as altar, kitchen as sanctuary
 - d. Blessings like motzi, infuse eating with ethics and ideals, Godliness
 - e. “When two sit together and things of Torah are shared the shehina dwells with them.”