

“Eating and Drinking”

The Talmud teaches: “One who eats and drinks on the ninth of Tishri is given credit for having fasted on both the ninth and the tenth.” *Kol ha-okhel v'shoteh bat'shi'i ma'aleh alav hakatuv k'ilu hit'ana t'shi'i va'asiri*. I'm going to take you on an eating and drinking tour tonight. I'm going to investigate the question as to whether one can be a materialist and still live a sacred life. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Tonight begins the third highest holy day at Bet Am Shalom. The second highest is Simchat Torah, and of course the highest holy day here is Purim. In case you missed our Purim festivities a couple of years ago, here is the most memorable shtikl of Torah from that spiel:

“Come, Mister Rabbi Man, daven the Havdallah;
Sundown come and I wanna go home.
Please, Mister Rabbi Man, I wanna piece of challah;
Sundown come and I wanna go home.”

And then something about babkas and bagels.

That little parody expresses as beautifully as anything I've ever heard the anxiety we feel at the borders of Yom Kippur: the anxiety on the way in, as well as on the way out.

Listen to this short take from the Talmud. Rabbi Bivi bar Abaye is trying to finish up the reading of all the parshiyot of Torah he missed during the year. He figures he has plenty of un-programmed time to get it done on the ninth of Tishri, before he has to begin the fast of Yom Kippur on the tenth of Tishri. But his colleague, Rabbi Chiya bar Rav of Difti, says “Shouldn’t you be fasting on the ninth of Tishri, too? Doesn’t it say in Leviticus, “You shall afflict yourselves on the evening of the NINTH of the month?” Then he answers himself: “No, of course we fast on the tenth and not the ninth. But one who eats and drinks on the ninth of Tishri is given credit for fasting on both the ninth and the tenth.” *Kol ha-okhel v’shoteh bat’shi’i ma’aleh alav hakatuv k’ilu hit’ana t’shi’i va’asiri.*

That’s our key line: “One who eats and drinks on the ninth of Tishri is given credit for having fasted on both the ninth and the tenth.” The obvious question is, why would someone want credit for fasting on the day BEFORE Yom Kippur? It’s not enough to fast on Yom Kippur itself?

This is one of those situations where the Rabbis know very well what the Torah means, but they’re taking advantage of a quirk in the Torah’s language to teach something of their own. They know that when the Torah says to begin the self-affliction on the ninth, it means for us to begin at sundown, not on the day itself. But suppose the Torah WAS suggesting that the fast extend backward into the previous day? What subtle message could the Torah be giving about the heightened meaning of Yom Kippur?

What Rabbi Chiya prescribes is not “fasting” on the day leading up to Yom Kippur, but, on the contrary, “eating and drinking.” Somehow, he says, the “eating and drinking” one performs on the way into Yom Kippur will count not as meeting one’s bodily needs, but as DENYING one’s bodily needs in the name of the higher spiritual work of the Day of Atonement.

What gives?

First of all, let’s agree that the Torah itself couldn’t care less about what one eats – or doesn’t eat – on the day before Yom Kippur. In fact, it doesn’t even tell us to fast, per se. It tells us “*v’initem et nafshoteychem,*” which means something like “make your body suffer ‘til you feel it.” It’s only the centuries of tradition itself which evolved the practice the Rabbis encoded: no eating, no drinking, no bathing or anointing, no wearing of leather, no sex. But nothing about the previous day.

That’s where the Rabbinic genius for spiritual creativity comes in. The Rabbis introduced something into Judaism which probably wasn’t there before: *Hakhanah*. Preparation. Or you could call it “anticipation.” Or “*kavannah,*” to use their term. “Intentionality.”

The early Rabbis were either adapting spiritual models from elsewhere, or inventing them themselves, or a combination of the two. One of their greatest innovations was this idea of performing exercises that lead up to the big moment. They made us clean the house

well before Pesach, then hunt for chametz by candlelight a full night before the seder.

They made us light Shabbat candles before the sunset on Friday. They made us precede the reading of the Torah with a blessing. They made us precede the eating of a meal with a blessing.

And, they made us take seriously the format of our eating prior to the onset of Yom Kippur. Instead of merely “carbo-loading,” they ordained an official “*s’udat hamafseket*,” translation: “a meal-of-getting-ready-to-stop-eating-and-drinking.” A meal dedicated to THINKING about fasting by THINKING ABOUT EATING and DRINKING.

They had the human psychological animal figured out. We human beings pay attention to something when we first acclimate ourselves to its opposite. Since the Rabbis wanted us to get every possible morsel of meaning out of the fast, so that it would in no way become an arbitrary ritual, they made us sit down to a large festive meal PRIOR to the fast, and to pay attention to the fact that eating and drinking is normal, and that fasting is NOT normal. That eating and drinking is what we do in the world, and that fasting is what we would do if we suddenly had no natural needs, i.e., if we were dead, or if we were angels, or if we were transported to a completely different realm of existence altogether.

That’s why they wanted us not simply to eat and drink on the ninth of Tishri to load up with carbs and liquids for the long fast ahead, but to eat in a way that brought us to full

consciousness about fasting, and even more importantly, that brought us to full consciousness about eating! So -- the Rabbis propose -- the well-planned, studied, sacred meal on the ninth of Tishri must have been what the Torah had in mind when it connected the ninth of Tishri with the tenth. The Torah’s secret plan – if you choose to read the Torah this way – was for us to radically change the way we eat by linking the routine act of eating with the exceptional act of fasting, and thus taking the routine out of eating. And if eating and drinking could be seen to represent all “normal” human behavior, then this little pre-Yom Kippur exercise could radically transform the way we Jewish humans think about “normal” human behavior. And that’s exactly what the Rabbis wanted to make happen in our heads: the radical transformation of normal human behavior. In other words, *teshuvah*.

Now that would be quite enough spiritual elevation for one night’s work. But there’s more.

This little line from the Talmud had staying power. It kept turning up in one creative commentary after another. Finally, on the eve of Yom Kippur in 1879, a great Polish rabbi named Yehuda Aryeh Leib of Ger, otherwise known as the third Gerer Rebbe, otherwise known by his famous commentary on the weekly portions and the holiday cycle, “S’fas Emes,” the “Language of Truth,” this rabbi offered his Chassidim a sermon that started with the Talmud’s great ancient insight, but quickly spiraled far beyond it.

Essentially, this is what he taught, as best I can interpret it: The meal of erev Yom Kippur is a *hakhanah*, a preparation for the fast. By eating this meal with the proper contemplation and intention, one can “*m’taken* -- literally “correct” one’s eating for the entire year. For essentially, the root of fasting is eating, since fasting means nothing outside the context of eating. Likewise, the root of *teshuvah*, repentance, is understanding the reason one sinned in the first place. If one could approach one’s sins by confronting why one descended to that sorry state, one could immediately solve the deeper problem that led one to sin. One could *m’taken* – “repair” – one’s wretched behavior. Just as the trick in repairing one’s eating is to connect it directly with fasting rather than to dissociate the two, so the trick in repairing one’s life is to understand how sin is directly connected to *achilah ush’tiah* – to “eating and drinking,” which are metaphors for the careless consuming we do every day of our lives.

Now he goes a little deeper: Let’s assume, he says, that the ninth of Tishri (or the eighth, or even the first of April or any other random day in the calendar) represents “this world,” *olam ha-zeh*. Let’s assume that Yom Kippur represents “the world to come,” *olam ha-ba*. In the world to come, we’re all exalted beings. We don’t eat and drink. More importantly, we don’t sin. We don’t do depraved things. We don’t even WANT to do depraved things. We can’t strive to be better, because there’s no room for improvement. And that’s where you and I are right now: *olam ha-ba*. “The world to come.” This is the world to come. Look around and see if you like it.

In “this world,” *olam ha-zeh*, we consume. Of course we consume. We have to consume to live, to survive. But because we consume, we’re prone to consuming in exploitative ways. When we do so, we lower ourselves. We surround ourselves with the shells of baseness. It’s too bad, but it’s more or less inevitable.

But if we could train ourselves to consume in “this world” as if we were living in an anteroom to the “next world,” we would be more careful about our acts of consumption. We would live as if everything we did mattered beyond itself. That’s the key: We would live as if everything really mattered. And because we don’t live that way, we fall into “sin.” We lose our way. And we have no idea how to find our way back to decency; back to humanity.

That – says the S’fas Emes – is why the eating and drinking on the day before Yom Kippur has to be done in direct relationship to Yom Kippur. We have to eat as if we were eating in “this world’s” anteroom to the “next world” of Yom Kippur. Otherwise, we will continue to think that *teshuvah* has something to do with abstract spiritual concepts, and nothing to do with the normal activity of our mundane lives. Yes, *teshuvah* involves learning to think differently, but to think differently about what? Answer: about how we live “on the ground” – at the least profound level of our being. So that by doing the Rabbis’ exercise, we can teach ourselves to do everything from eating a sandwich to making love to driving our SUV as if the manner of our doing it determined whether we would enter paradise or remain in gehenna.

The S'fas Emes mentions, as a sort of coda, that we've got it better than the angels. The angels are already exalted creatures, so they can never get any credit for repenting. We, on the other hand, have a chance to elevate ourselves – or not. That's why the angels who come to visit Abraham only pretend to eat and drink, while Abraham himself partakes of the whole four-course affair. Angels don't do Yom Kippur, because they can't do the most important part of the holiday, which is the conscientious eating of a big meal on the previous afternoon. So, the main part of Yom Kippur is to learn how to eat the preparatory meal. If we can do that – and angels CAN'T do that – if we can do that, then we've got a shot at *olam ha-ba*. In summary, he's teaching that all life is a meal prior to Yom Kippur; or, all life is a preparation for the world to come.

Now a little coda of my own. What the S'fas Emes assumes you know, and what Martin Buber goes to the trouble of explaining, since he assumes you DON'T know this, is that in Chassidic thinking, the terms “this world” and “next world” are not what you think. In fact, Buber says that the difference between Judaism and other religions is that we all talk about “this world” and “the next world,” but in Judaism they're the same thing. They've merely been separated into two by our amnesia: we've forgotten how to see them as one. The *kuntz* – the catch – is to realize that by changing the way we think about “this world,” we transform it into “the world to come.” The world to come IS this world, seen with open eyes. By opening our eyes, we “realize” the world to come. “Realize” in both senses of the word: to know it, and to make it so.

I know that this is a bit disappointing. You were hoping that “the world to come” would be a fancy resort spa in Majorca, in season. Instead, the world to come is going to look like Yom Kippur. Except that maybe there’ll be babka. And challah. And bagels. And maybe not.

But fear not. What Buber also makes clear is that for Judaism, especially as the early Chassidic masters read it, the physical world is to be embraced rather than run away from. Unlike other mysticisms which reject the material world, Judaism goes ahead and eats and drinks and swims and bathes and anoints and has sex and wears leather shoes and goes on nice vacations, even to Majorca in season. But it takes those things and offers them up to God. Judaism teaches its adherents to make our physical joy a divine gift that we somehow receive and then give back to the One who provided it in the first place.

Because when we think our physical pleasures – our CONSUMING – is going to be a gift to God, we’re more careful about how we consume. We consume in a holy way, and not in a mindless and wasteful way. We consume in a sharing way. We learn not to exploit. We learn not to overuse. We learn to replenish. We learn moderation. We learn to monitor our behavior, and to control it when it reaches dangerous levels.

So, Yom Kippur is an exercise in reminding ourselves to offer up the physical realities of our lives as a sacred gift. And EREV Yom Kippur is part and parcel of that exercise.

If someone were to ask, “Until what time may we eat on the eve of Yom Kippur?” the appropriate response might be, “Sorry, that’s the wrong question.” Because to answer the question at its own level is to acknowledge the mistaken idea that all eating prior to Yom Kippur is simply a satisfying of hunger or a stocking up on physical resources. A meeting of needs and wants.

Rather, the question should be re-phrased: “Given that we must stop eating before the sun sets on the eve of Yom Kippur, how must we go about eating?”

The re-phrased question causes us to see the eating AND the fasting as dual stages of the same religio-spiritual discipline. The eating is done not “so that” we can fast, but so that we can understand “consuming” as an act we must learn to transform if we are to achieve that wonderful combination of mindfulness and ethical valuing known as *teshuvah*.

I wish I could have told you all of this LAST night, before you began the day of “eating and drinking” that you engaged in before coming here tonight. But there’s a consolation: I’m telling you this before TOMORROW night. For tomorrow’s so-called “break-fast” is often the largest meal we eat during the entire year, except perhaps for this afternoon’s *s’udah mafseket*, the “meal-of-getting-ready-to-stop-eating-and-drinking.” The break-fast is the most hastily consumed of any meal we eat. Ever. It is often eaten without regard for quantities or content, or for true physical need. In that sense, tomorrow evening’s meal is eaten in very much the same way we eat our physical resources. It is the way we “eat” our friends and relatives, our clients and our competitors, our natural

environment, our fellow humans who toil in squalor to sew our clothes and grow our coffee on the other side of our dying planet. It is the way we are able to compartmentalize between our lofty principles (which we celebrate throughout Yom Kippur) and our immediate desire for self-gratification (which we indulge with abandon when the holiday abruptly concludes).

So, the danger is NOT that we will return to “sinning” in the classic sense when our holy day ends, for none of us is that kind of sinner. It is, rather, the almost certain danger that we will have spent twenty-five hours together in the *olam ha-ba* of Yom Kippur, only to have missed the point entirely and returned to a life wherein eating and drinking are acts of consumption rather than gifts to the Source of All Life; where eating and drinking and sex and talking and doing business and buying and selling and mining resources and using fuel and exploiting labor – and everything we do as part of our “normal” lives – everything returns to its basic level, which is the level of obliviousness.

We will have missed the most profound idea of all, perhaps the truest gift of universal awareness that our Jewish tradition bequeaths to us: that this world IS the world to come, if only we would realize it.

The Sephardic blessing AFTER the meal includes this profound meditation, which I believe says everything I have been trying to teach tonight:

Mah she-achalnu yihyeh l'sova

That which we ate, may it satiate us;

u-mah she-shatinu yihyeh lir'fuah

And that which we drank, may it give us good health;

u-mah she-hotarnu yihyeh liv'rachah

And that which is left over, may we see it as a blessing;

B'rich rach'mana, marey d'hai pita

Blessed are You, Source of Mercy, for You are the master of this bread.