Drash for Yom Kippur 5773

By Shevach Lambert

In our haftarah portion today, the prophet Isaiah declares the true meaning of the fast: "Can this the fast day I choose, a day when a man merely afflicts himself?...Surely this is the fast I choose: to open the bonds of wickedness...let the oppressed go free...divide your bread with the hungry, and bring the moaning poor into your home; when you see the naked, to cover him, and do not ignore your kin."

The message therein is powerful: that all the breast-beating in which we may indulge is meaningless if the heart within remains untouched by human caring or concern. Yet it raises a question: why does the prophet equate acts of kindness, justice, and compassion with a fast? What does abstaining from food and drink have to do with dividing one's bread with the hungry?

I want to suggest that the answer may lie in fact that a fast disrupts the deepest relationship we have with the world: eating and drinking. Through the act of eating we make the external internal, we take that which was once independent of us and make it part of ourselves. To voluntarily deprive ourselves of food reminds us in an up close and personal way of our dependence on something we so often take for granted.

In a sense, the existence of people who are homeless and hungry is equally disruptive of our relationship with the world. For if it is the earth that mostly sustains our physical relationship with life,

it is other people who best maintain our spiritual relationship. When we deprive ourselves of meaningful connection with others, and turn away from those who are in most need of this connection, then we deprive ourselves of our soul. Perhaps the fast Isaiah calls for is a fast of the soul, necessary to remind us of the importance of our relationship with all of G-d's image's on earth.

Today I want to take a closer look at the relationship between food for the body and food for the soul. In so doing, I must acknowledge that to devote this talk to the subject of food on a day in which so many of us are occupied with *avoiding* it seems a bit meshugannas. It's one thing to afflict our souls, but why rub it in? My purpose is not to add insult to injury, however, but to note that our relationship to food in these days is in many ways comparable to how we relate to another human being, and reflects our estrangement from G-d, from the earth, and from each other.

There is a well known story of a Chasid who one day approached his rebbe and asked, "Rabbi, it appears to me that I do all that is necessary to be a *tzaddik*, a wholly righteous man. I pray three times a day, I practice tzedakah, do mitzvoth, keep kosher, am shomer Shabbos. I do it all! So tell me, what is the difference between me and a tzaddik?"

In reply, the rebbe handed him an apple and asked him to eat it. The Chasid, surprised, shrugged, said the blessing over fruit – *boray pri ha'etz* - and began to eat. The rebbe stopped him. "Why," he asked, "did you just say that blessing?"

"Rebbe, what a question! I said the blessing in order to eat the fruit!"

"And that," said the rebbe, "is the difference between you and a tzaddik. You said the blessing in order to eat the fruit. A tzaddik would eat the fruit in order to say the blessing."

The story encapsulates much of the Jewish attitude toward food and eating in general. The act of eating was seen not only as the primary means of supplying physical nutrition, but was an important source of spiritual nutrition as well. The practice of saying one blessing before, and four blessings after, a meal made food a way of bringing earth to heaven, of drawing holiness out of the ordinary, making the secular sacred.

The centrality of food in our tradition is one of its most distinctive features. Our major festivals are aligned with the agricultural harvest schedule. We inaugurate our birth as a people at Passover with the Seder, in which different types of food symbolize the key elements of our story. We mark almost all our holidays with some kind of food; dairy at Shavuot, apples and honey at Rosh Hashanah, four kinds of fruit at Tu B'Shevat, hamantashen at Purim.

Moreover, food served not only as a means of sanctification, but of social connection as well. Our dietary laws helped bind us together as a people, distinct from others. The rules that governed agriculture, such as the sabbatical and Jubilee years, during which we let the land lie fallow, fostered an intimate connection with the earth itself.

It seems, however, that all the religious, social, and ecological connections which food once symbolized have seemingly disintegrated in the onslaught of the fast food culture. Food, when turned into a commodity, ceases to be a relationship. It becomes an object whose sole purpose is gratify our material appetites, or in some cases, a means with which to fill a spiritual or psychological void.

Before modern culture began creating food-like stuff out of ingredients that read like a chemistry experiment, the earth was the source of all that we ate. The earth as food-source is called in Hebrew *adamah,* a word composed of four letters: aleph, dalet, mem, and heh. In some kabbalistic traditions, the first letter, aleph, alludes to G-d in the most sublime, transcendent state – the perfect Unity of all, G-d as HaShem. The final letter heh alludes to the divine in its earthly manifestation; as immanent in all life – G-d as Elokim. The middle letters, dalet and mem, spell *dam*, blood, where the spiritual and the earthly are intermingled – ' *ki ha'dam hanefesh'*; 'for the blood is the nefesh', the life of the being.

Adam, the human, is the same word as adamah minus the final letter heh. This is usually taken to reflect his origin from dust of the adamah, but to me that it might also suggest that Adam by himself is somehow incomplete, missing something. Indeed, G-d decides that human can't make it on his own, so all the creatures of the earth, formed from the very same adamah as was Adam, are brought to the human to see if any would make a suitable partner. None of them

seemed to fit the bill, so the partner had to be taken from the side of the human, causing the human to become male and female.

There are two striking aspects to this story. One, humanity bears a deep intrinsic connection to the earth and its inhabitants, as we are all formed from the same medium, the adamah. Second, despite this connection, humanity was unable to establish a full partnership with the denizens of the earth, and required such a need to be supplied from within.

This to me suggests a paradox, with which we struggle to this day. We earthly creatures are all made of the same stuff, yet something about the nature of humanity keeps us at a distance from the rest of G-d's creation – one letter removed, as it were. Although we share a connection to the whole of creation, it seems we humans were designed to behave as strangers and sojourners on this planet. Modern culture has aggravated this alienation to the breaking point.

This flaw in our original make-up, this missing letter *heh,* may explain why, how, and what we eat is so significant in our tradition As Arthur Wascow has pointed out, other creation stories tell of humanity's origin as the result of wars between gods, or a sibling rivalry, or a trickster like Coyote pulling a fast one on the sky-god. We, on the other hand, got our start by the simple act of *eating.* The wrong fruit. Of all the commands G-d could have given the humans – be fruitful and multiply, take care of each other, don't tease the animals – the one that was chosen was one about eating. Don't eat this one fruit. So of course we did. Perhaps we were trying to

become like G-d, to recover our missing *heh.* But this primeval act of disobedient eating disconnected us from our Creator, from the rest of created beings, and from the earth. No wonder we fast on the Day of Atonement – we've got a lot to make up for.

What was it about this one act of disobedience that warranted such a consequence? Consider: to be in relationship with the world, G-d must be in the role of Supreme Giver; to establish this relationship, to close the circle, we must be consciously aware of our role as divine recipient. Consequently, all the fruits of the Garden were given as gifts to us. To remind us of this, and to establish divine sovereignty over the entire world, G-d placed one fruit off-limits, lest we think of the fruit as belonging to us. The gratitude we felt in response to G-d's gift was meant to foster this ever-present connection with our Divine source. Gratitude was our way of adding the final letter *heh*. Yet by taking the one fruit denied us, we rejected our role as recipients. We sought gratification instead of gratitude, and chose self-serving over divine service.

Food thus symbolized our original relationship both with G-d and with the world, and also caused our estrangement from G-d and the world. So it was perhaps through the medium of food that this separation was to be mended. Maybe that's why so much of our religious tradition revolves around the care and handling of food.

In earlier times, food established a bond between G-d and humanity via the korbanot, the sacrificial system. The korban, the drawing near, was an offering to the Creator of the produce of

creation, be it animal or vegetable, as raised or wrought by our own hands. A korban was kind of like paying rent to the true owner of the earth. Moreover, it symbolized our intimate connection with the earth, as we were deeply involved in the raising and cultivation of our food. The act of turning over the fruits of our labor as a return gift to the Creator held a deep personal significance.

Food created a bond among humans as well. Kashrut, the dietary laws, serves to identify one as being part of a specific culture, part of our identity. To keep kosher is to keep connected. Kashrut also dictated much of our relationship with the earth; what, how, and why we grew certain foods, which animals were ok and which were off limits. The institution of blessings before and after eating kept us mindful of the ultimate Source of our food.

Food established our deepest connection to the earth itself. The Sabbatical and the Yovel years required us to release our hold on the earth's produce, and allow it to rest and rejuvenate. By abstaining from the harvest on those years, humans paid homage to the hummus. Earthlings restored the earth. The sabbatical and yovel years also restructured our social relations by requiring us to release bondsmen and return all property back to its original family inheritance.

Nowadays why, how, and what we eat are governed by a very different set of beliefs and practices, which seem to drive us further apart from our religious, ecological, and social relations. Food has for the most part ceased to be a means of social and religious interaction,

and has become the property of a few. Our personal connection with our sustenance has been co-opted by Monsanto and Archer-Daniels. Before the modern food era, which Michael Pollan refers to as the rise of nutritionism, we relied for guidance on what to eat from our national, ethnic, religious or regional cultures. Modern day Western diets, however, driven by a mix of market and political forces designed to promote the health of the bottom line, has replaced your grandmother's cookbook with a cacophony of marketing experts whose main goal is to promote not health, not social cohesion, not environmental sensitivity - but consumption. With an emphasis on quantity over quality, efficient transportation over appropriate digestion, food production has been hijacked from satisfying need to gratifying greed.

One of the problems with a diet directed by agribusiness is that it ignores the subtle and complex relationship which whole foods evolved with people over thousands of years, and supplants this relationship with a glut of hyper-charged sugars and carbohydrates designed for instant, temporary, gratification while fooling our bodies into thinking we need more. Worse, by converting us into simple consumers of food-like stuff, the modern food industry ignores the complexity of the human personality, the emotional, spiritual, and social aspects of which have just as much to do with our ability to digest as do our enzymes.

You may have heard of the French paradox, where American nutritionists have observed to their great frustration how the French,

who tend to regard food as being more about pleasure and society than about bodily health, blithely indulge their appetites for vast amounts of saturated fats and other allegedly toxic nutrients, washed down with wine. By any measure of justice they should all be keeling over in the street outside their favorite decadent restaurant. The trouble is they don't *know* this, and so they go about fit as fiddles.

Of course, as Michael Pollan notes, nutritionists "pay far more attention to the chemistry of food than to the sociology or ecology of eating." They overlook the fact that the French eat far differently than we do. They seldom snack, they eat most of their meals shared with other people, eat smaller portions, and don't come back for seconds. And they spend far more time *enjoying* their meal. For many French, food is still a relationship, not a commodity.

The reductionist approach to food production, which makes food a collection of individual ingredients, and turns people into consumers, has its most tragic effects on the way in which food is distributed to those most in need of it. When a world-wide food market controlled by the affluent dictates how, what, and which foods are manufactured and sold, they also condemn those who cannot afford it to starvation.

People living in poverty across the globe face hunger not because of a scarcity of food but because they do not have control over their own food sources. Communities that used to get their food from nearby farms are now dependent on imported food, which can become too expensive or unavailable altogether. This lack of access

to sustainable local food in developing countries is due to a number of reasons:

- The land that local farmers were planting gets confiscated for economic development projects.
- Farmers who do have land are unable to water their crops because their water sources become contaminated or used up by factories.
- Global economic policies like Free Trade result in an influx of cheap food imports to local markets. Local farmers can't compete with these cheap food imports and are forced out of business. When the local farmers stop farming, communities lose self-sufficiency and become dependent on imported food. Then when the price of imports rises—as it has in recent years—hunger and extreme poverty result.

Well-intentioned food aid programs that provide free or cheap food to those facing hunger can have the same effect as free trade policies. For example, in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti, international donors, including the U.S. government, sent massive amounts of food aid. In the short term, this food helped feed thousands of earthquake survivors who had lost everything. But it has had an unintended—and devastating—consequence on local farmers. The influx of free rice from abroad brought the price of Haitian rice down so low that Haitian farmers couldn't compete. Because they couldn't earn an income from their crops, they couldn't purchase seeds for the next year's crop.

Moreover the kind of food aid that does come in often ignores precisely the cultural and social conditions that are so important to a healthy diet. My cousin Paul Barker was for many years director of CARE in places like the Sudan, Somalia, and the Congo. He once told me of a trip he had to take to one of the few functioning airports left in Somalia to welcome a multimillionaire who had gone to great expense to charter a plane and pack it with foodstuffs to be distributed among the starving local population.

"The trouble was," Paul said. "not a single bit of the food he'd brought with him could be eaten by the people he brought it for. They could never digest this stuff, or their religious tradition forbade it. What I really wanted to tell this good hearted individual was next time, *just send the money*."

Progress is being made as many donors have stopped sending in-kind food aid, and instead are providing cash donations so that food can be purchased closer to where it is needed in order to stimulate local agricultural economies, not undermine them. In Haiti, the CARE organization has declined US food aide in favor of cash contributions that can be used to rebuild the local infrastructure.

The fact remains, however, that when food is considered a property, instead of a human right, it's content and distribution too often are determined not the needs of the hungry but by the whims of the market. In a world where every day, 925 million people go hungry, and one out of four children in developing countries—roughly 146 million— are undernourished, and 6.5 million of these children die each year from hunger-related causes, the idea that something as

basic as food is the private property of a few multinational corporations is a *chillul HaShem*, a desecration of G-d's Name and of G-d's creation.

We cannot go back to the good old days, before grandma's cookbook was replaced Sara Lee's sugar fix and the family farm by Monsanto's monopoly. But it does seem that what is urgently needed is a kind of renewal of the traditional Jewish relationship to food, so that its social, ecological, and ethical significance can begin to once again inform the choices we make about what we eat.

First and foremost, we must release the notion that food is something we own in favor of the realization that it is a gift from our Creator. In the words of Emmanual Levinas, "the problem of a hungry world can be resolved only if the food of the owners and those who are provided for ceases to appear to them as inalienable property, but is recognized as a gift they have received for which thanks must be given and to which others have a right. Scarcity is a social and moral problem and not exclusively an economic one."

There are a number of steps we can take to better sensitize ourselves to the real life consequences of the economic enslavement of our food supplies. We can take up the SNAP challenge of Mazon, the Jewish hunger organization, which calls on us to restrict our weekly food purchases to the amount allotted to those on the food stamp program. See how long you can manage on $35 per person per week. Besides sensitizing us to the daily dilemmas faced by our most disadvantaged citizens, we might find ourselves forced to decide what is truly important in our diet, and what is merely a

unconscious concession to the forces of mass marketing.

In addition, we can carefully monitor our tzedakah contributions so as to follow Maimonides' rule that "the highest degree (of tzedakah), exceeded by none, is that of the person who assists a poor person by providing him with a gift or a loan...or by helping him find employment—in a word, by putting him where he can dispense with other people's aid." Let's make sure that donations to food aid go directly to programs that promote local control over food production and distribution.

Following Rabbi's Yitz's eloquent advice, we can actively pursue a system of ethical kashrut, in which traditional guidelines are preserved and expanded, so that the conditions under which animals are raised, the manner in which food workers are treated, and the sustainability of food production are equally key in determining what is kosher and what is not.

Finally, I would suggest that we accept the discipline of kashrut not as a way of eating with a good conscience, but as a conscious way of eating. Let us cultivate an awareness that our food is not a commodity but a relationship: a relationship with our physical and psychological health; with our family in the people Israel and with family in Somalia; with the earth, from which we were made and from which we partake of every day; and a relationship with our Creator, whose image may we be ever conscious of when seen in the eyes of each other.

G'mar hatimah tovah.