

Imagining the Jewish God

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Chapter Nineteen

"Don't Forget the Potatoes"

Imagining God Through Food

Susan Handelman

Prayer for peace, and grace, and spiritual food,
For wisdom and guidance—for all these are good,
But don't forget the potatoes.

—"Prayer and Potatoes," J. T. Pettee¹

Yes, indeed, let's "not forget the potatoes" when we talk about how Jews imagine God. Judaism, needless to say, has its many holiday feasts and fasts, intricate laws of kashrut and blessings to be said over foods, along with endless rabbinic commentary about it all. (We all know the familiar quip: "How do you sum up the meaning of all the Jewish holidays? 'They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat'"). As contemporary food writer Ruth Reichl puts it: There is "a subtext in every tale we tell about food."² But had I been asked to write for this volume years ago, I would have dealt with epistemology and philosophy, and forgotten those potatoes. Here, I am going to make my way back to them.

In my earlier academic career, I researched the connections between rabbinic hermeneutics and postmodern literary theory, and engaged with figures such as Scholem, Benjamin, Levinas, Rosenzweig, and Derrida. They, like me, were modern intellectual Jews struggling with Jewish tradition, theology, and contemporary philosophy. Later, I realized I had missed something critical: the imaginative creativity of rabbinic Jewish exegesis, of the "Oral Torah (*Torah she-be-al' peh*, lit. "Torah of the Mouth") is mediated through the personal and living teacher-student (*Rav* and *talmid*) relationship. Classical Jewish "texts" are not just abstract webs of language, documents of cultural history, or theological narratives—but rhetorically self-conscious "pedagogical" performances. They enact and engender that teacher/student relationship.

I chose a university career because teaching felt to me as much my vocation as scholarship. So I went on to research the mentor/disciple relationship in my *"Make Yourself a Teacher": Rabbinic Tales of Mentors and Disciples* (2011).

In the introduction to *Make Yourself a Teacher*, I cited the following daring "food" parable from the Midrash:

Another explanation of, "*And he gave to Moses, when he finished talking with him upon Mount Sinai, two tablets of Testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God*" [Exod. 31:18]. . . . It is written: "For God gives wisdom (*hochmah*). Out of His mouth comes knowledge (*da'at*) and discernment (*tevunah*)" [Prov. 2:6].

Wisdom is great, but greater still is knowledge and discernment. So God gives wisdom. But to him whom He loves, "out of His own mouth" comes knowledge and discernment [. . .]

R. Yitzhak and R. Levi discussed this verse. One said: "It can be compared to a rich man who had a son. The son came home from school and found a platter of food in front of his father. His father took a piece and gave it to him . . . but the son said: 'I only want the piece which is in your mouth.' The father gave it to him from his own mouth, because he was so beloved."

[. . .] Another explanation of "For God gives wisdom": You find that when Israel stood ready to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai, they wanted to hear the Ten Commandments from God's own mouth. R. Pinhas ben Hama, the priest, said: "Two things did Israel ask of God—to see His likeness and to hear from His own mouth the Decalogue, as it says, 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth'" [Song of Songs 1:2].³

In this midrash, "seeing" God is connected to eating and kissing, a "giving" from the "mouth" which signifies deep love and intimacy—in other words, to a teaching that is not just externally spoken with the lips or read on a page, but comes from even further: from "inside the mouth," "spirit to spirit," "breath to breath," inner soul to inner soul, and penetrates deep into the body.⁴ I would dare say that this "piece which is in your mouth"—this intimate connection and the hunger for it—is the ultimate religious meaning of all the food concerns, laws, rituals, images, and metaphors permeating Biblical, Midrashic, Talmudic, Kabbalistic, and Hassidic literature.

Simply put, food has a central place in the ways that Jews have hungered for, known, and imagined God. So in this essay, I would like to explore that "Torah of the Mouth" more literally than I ever have before, and inquire how Jews imagine God "through the mouth"—through food. With the recent rise of "Food Studies" and "Food Theory" in academia, scholars have begun to look anew at the history and cultural meanings of Jewish food. There is a mass of new ethnographic and anthropological work on Jewish foodways—not to mention the proliferating Jewish cookbooks on the

bestseller lists, and popular cooking television shows. But philosophers and theologians, after all, also have to eat . . . or there would be no philosophy. What does that mean on a deeper level? What's the connection between food, philosophy, and faith? Here, I'm not going to use the tools of history, anthropology, semiotics, or cultural studies. These have been employed quite well by others engaging this topic.⁵ Instead, I want to build on insights of two figures who have inspired me in their writings about food: one a Sephardic rabbi and one a non-Jew.

It's the rabbi of whom I will mostly speak, but I preface my discussion of his work with some brief words about and from the non-Jew: M. F. K. [Mary Francis Kennedy] Fisher (1908–1992). Originally from Whittier, California, she was a pioneer of twentieth-century food writing. W. H. Auden famously remarked about her: "I do not know of anyone in the United States who writes better prose."⁶ The rabbi, Yéhouda Léon Askénazi, lived during the same era (1922–1996). He was born in Oran, Algeria to a long line of rabbis and kabbalists. After World War II, he immigrated to France and became a leader of post-war French Jewry and one of the great Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century. He is usually referred to by the name "Manitou"—a nickname he acquired as a young man in the French Scouting movement. (In Native-American language, the name "Manitou" signifies "Great Spirit" or "the Big Chief.") I will refer to him that way from here on. Because Manitou's works have not yet been translated from French and Hebrew into English, he is not as well-known as his colleagues in post-World War II France, in what came to be called the "Parisian School of Jewish Thought" (*L'École de Pensée Juive de Paris*): Emmanuel Levinas, Éliane Amado Levy-Valensi, Elie Wiesel, Albert Memmi, Andre Neher, and other such luminaries. So I hope this essay will serve a kind of introduction to him, as well.

At first glance, of course, the California food writer and Sephardic rabbi seem like an "odd couple." Yet both M. F. K. Fisher and Manitou deeply pondered, each in his or her own way, the relationship between our physical and spiritual hungers. Each one's life and work was far more complex than any simple labels. French culture, though, was a critical part of each of their identities. From her first marriage in 1929 until well into her later life, Fisher spent many years living on and off in France, which became a second home. Like Manitou, she suffered in Europe from the rise of Nazism and World War II. During her life, she published twenty-seven books. The three which established her reputation and are counted among her best came out during World War II: *Consider the Oyster* (1941), *How to Cook a Wolf* (1942), and *The Gastronomical Me* (1943). They reflect its turmoil, her personal struggles, and meditations on love, loss, and life. Food is the ostensible subject, but as she once said, "I do not consider myself a food writer."⁷

In 1943, in the midst of the war, and after the death of her second husband by suicide after an excruciating illness, Buerger's disease, which led to amputation of his leg and ceaseless pain, Fisher penned one of the most eloquent and famous passages in all food writing:

People ask me: Why do you write about food, and eating and drinking? Why don't you write about the struggles for power and security, and about love, the way others do?

They ask it accusingly, as if I were somehow gross, and unfaithful to the honor of my craft.

The easiest answer is to say that, like most other humans, I am hungry. But there is more than that. It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I'm really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it . . . and then the warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied . . . and it is all one. . . .

I tell about myself, and how I ate bread on a lasting hillside, or drank red wine in a room now blown to bits, and it happens without my willing it that I am telling you about the people with me then, and their other deeper needs for love and happiness.

There is food in the bowl, and more often than not, because of what honesty I have, there is nourishment in the heart, to feed the wild or more insistent hungers. We must eat. If, in the face of that dread fact, we can find other nourishment, and tolerance and compassion for it, we'll be no less full of human dignity.

There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine drunk. And that is my answer, when people ask me: why do you write about hunger, and not wars or love.⁸

The rest of my essay here is a "Jewish commentary" on this remarkable passage. If there is any comparable quotation that sums up Manitou's sense of the relation of food and spirituality, it might be this:

It is through food that I know I have a Creator. Through food I experience the permanence of my relation to the Creator. If I stopped eating, I would cease to exist. Food is the continuation of the gesture of Creation; it is what maintains me in life. There is yet deeper spiritual meaning: in feeding myself, I spiritualize the material. I transform it into soul. The fact of eating is the religious act par excellence. That's why, in every religion, the important rituals always connect to food.⁹

World War II was also a traumatic and formative experience for Manitou. Afterwards, he dedicated his life to repairing for his generation the massive rupture in Jewish community, faith, philosophy, and ethics that had occurred in the Nazi era. He also well understood how in "the dread fact that we must

eat" there is a "communion of more than our bodies." For him "this dread fact" provides the very foundation of Jewish faith and moral consciousness, as we'll see. I might also say, a bit tongue-in-cheek, that it's not accidental a rabbi from France, with its decidedly gastronomic culture, would write brilliantly about food and God. After all, France produced both Descartes—the founder of modern philosophy who famously argued, "I think, therefore I am"—and, one hundred years later also Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, the eighteenth-century creator of the gastronomic essay. It was Brillat-Savarin who first said the famous words: "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are."¹⁰ (M. F. K. Fisher, in fact, was the acclaimed English translator of Brillat-Savarin's classic 1845 work, *The Physiology of Taste*.) Or, as a contemporary French-Jewish rabbi and teacher of mine likes to say every Passover: "The Rabbis understood that in order to change your consciousness, you have to change your menu."¹¹

Like M. F. K. Fisher, Manitou's life traversed different cultures and continents. In the years before World War II, when Fisher was taking boats back and forth across the Atlantic between her homes in California, France and Switzerland, trying to find herself as a young wife and writer in an increasingly unhappy marriage, Manitou was a young man studying in a traditional *yeshiva* in the multicultural French colonial city of Oran and in French secular high school. He then studied Kabbalah in Marrakesh, along with philosophy and psychology at the University of Algiers, and early on was known as a brilliant and outstanding scholar.¹² All that came to an abrupt end with the German victory over France and rise of the Vichy government, which ruled Oran till 1942. After the allies liberated Algeria, he was drafted into the French Foreign Legion, fought the Germans, and was wounded in Strasbourg. Then began the second phase of his life: immigration to France after the war; studies in philosophy and anthropology at the Sorbonne and University of Paris; and marriage to a woman who had lost all her family in Auschwitz. He then began his life's work of rebuilding the traumatized Jewish community of France and trying to guide the perplexed of his generation.¹³

In Manitou's writings about food and Judaism, which I'll examine in depth below, he also employs a special method of analysis which he learned from his greatest teacher in France after the war, the brilliant Russian-Jewish refugee scholar, Jacob Gordin (1896–1947). Gordin, wrote Manitou,

represented for me a type of a cultural synthesis on very high level between traditional Jewish culture and European culture. Jacob Gordin was a great Talmudist, Kabbalist, and philosopher who made us discover the possibility of a relation between general thought and Jewish tradition, a relation formulated according to the criteria of Jewish tradition. We rediscovered the importance of Jewish tradition in universal culture.¹⁴

"Returning to Hebrew" was one of the key principles he absorbed from Gordin, which we will see at work in his analysis of food, faith, God, and Torah.¹⁵ He defines this "return to Hebrew" in philosophical terms as the "rehabilitation of the immediate intuitions of Jewish consciousness as a coherence of thought."¹⁶ That is, one does not place the epistemology or philosophical-cultural heritage of Western thought as the higher criteria by which to then judge or interpret Judaism; rather one retains these "immediate intuitions of Jewish consciousness" and thought as primary, and then filters Western thought and other cultures through it.¹⁷

FOOD AND FAITH: I EAT, THEREFORE I AM CREATED

After Abraham's guests, the travelers, had eaten and drunk, they stood up to bless Abraham. But he said to them, "Did you eat of what was mine? You ate of that which belongs to the God of the Universe [*El Olam*] Thank, praise and bless the One who spoke and created the universe."¹⁸

Manitou's methodology in the two essays I'll now discuss is characteristic of the approach he learned from Jacob Gordin. We'll see how he takes a verse from Hebrew scripture or a rabbinic source, elicits those "immediate intuitions of Jewish consciousness" and then "translates" them psychologically, philosophically and anthropologically into Western categories. Then he "re-translates" back into specifically Jewish categories of thought from the Jewish legal and mystical traditions. At the same time, the re-translation critiques the limits of the Western philosophical categories and supersedes them. There is a coalescence of the several levels, even as he expresses complex ideas in seemingly simple terms. This way of teaching and learning also served his larger religious, philosophical and educational goals in post-World War II France. And ultimately it will lead to us not forgetting those potatoes.

The first essay, "*Foi et morale*" ("Faith and Ethics") comes from a volume in French of Manitou's collected writings on the Jewish holidays, *Ki Mitsion II: Le calendrier hébraïque*. The second is from a collection on the weekly liturgical biblical reading, *Ki Mitsion I: notes sur la paracha*. In the first piece, he examines the biblical idea of Creation and ties it to ethics and eating. The second comments on Chapter 1 of Leviticus and analyzes the food sacrifices in the rituals of the ancient Jerusalem Temple. The first takes a philosophical approach; the second is more anthropological and psychological.

At the beginning of "*Foi et morale*," he probes the meaning of *Rosh Hashana*, the Jewish New Year, by noting that the biblical assertion in the first lines of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," is a foundation of Jewish thought. No news there of course, but he goes on

to refine the nature of this assertion: The Bible, he says, is not concerned here to "prove the existence of God" but rather to stress the nature of God as "Creator." Why is that distinction important? Here is his "translation" into philosophical language: this assertion also confirms our "manner of being in the world" as that of a "creature"; and being a creature means that I exist only because I have received the gift of being that brings me into existence and sustains me as such. Furthermore, to bestow existence on something outside the self is also the fundamental moral act: "The foundation of moral consciousness also begins here: to recognize oneself as created, as having been given existence gratuitously by the Creator. The project of our lives, then, becomes to morally earn that existence."¹⁹

Now, where are we constantly reminded of the fact that we are not autonomous beings, not self-created? Food! Food, "the need to constantly nourish and sustain ourselves, reminds us of our finitude in a way no abstract philosophy can."²⁰ Yes, even the philosopher has to eat. Without that nourishment, there is neither "I think" nor "I am." Or in Manitou's words: "[T]he fundamental experience of being created comes from the fact that a person has to eat in order to live"; and "the presence of the highest values depends, at the end of the day, on the fact of physical and food . . . that's a philosophical scandal and true mystery."²¹ We begin to see the movement back and forth between Jewish thought and philosophy, and the implicit critique of philosophy in favor of those potatoes.²²

The next part of "*Foi et morale*" further addresses the relations among food, philosophy and religion, and then re-translates the whole back into the traditional Jewish discourse of midrash. One could, says Manitou, first try to present creation as a philosophical idea. Indeed, there is a great theological and philosophical tradition of "proofs for the existence of God" that also try to demonstrate the world was created. Yet, as he notes, that evidence only persuades those who are sensitive to the postulates of rationality, and who already agree on certain principles of causality—in other words, to a certain family of intellectuals. But he claims that religious truth—which he defines here as "a coherent system of religious thought" that is "universal," i.e., "*that is accessible to everybody*"—can't attach its message to any particular intellectual method or philosophical school of thought. In fact, there are many intellectual systems in which the metaphysical notion of creation has no place at all.²³

In sum, Jewish tradition can't make the *intellectual* conviction of the creation of the world, or attachment to any one philosophical system, the foundation for religious consciousness. (In one of his typically ironic aphorisms, Manitou is reported to have defined a theologian as "a philosopher who tries to persuade himself that he's a believer."²⁴ Varying philosophical systems, he

adds, can be a *secondary* means to clarify something more fundamental and universally accessible to Jewish religious consciousness. That, he defines as “a primary piety” which comes about directly by knowing oneself as a creature, i.e., *not* as an autonomous being. Everyone, whether intellectual or illiterate, feels the subjective, immediate, and urgent experience of bodily hunger and the need to eat; knowing oneself existentially as a creature by virtue of this need to eat is a basis for this “primary piety.”²⁵

So far Manitou. Obviously, though, not all the many writers, philosophers, theologians, and gastronomes who have written about eating have come to the same conclusion. One could instead decide to become an Epicurean, a Stoic, a glutton, an ascetic—or see food as a simple mark of our tragic mortality . . . and nothing more. The contemporary literary critic Sandra Gilbert, in her recent book *The Culinary Imagination*, interprets Brillat-Savarin’s famous “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are” precisely in that sense:

That he ate at all—that he *had* to eat and had to eat food that had once been alive—is of course tautological, yet crucial. Like all of us, Brillat-Savarin ate what he *was himself*: As a mortal being, he ate other mortal things, he ate mortality. Thus what he ate was what he was. He ate *because* he was, and he *was* because he ate. He resided, like the rest of us, on the food chain.²⁶

Manitou, though, has reframed that sense of mortality (“I am because I eat”) through a Jewish perspective to connect food, faith, and ethics. He now proceeds to subsume the philosophical language back into traditional Jewish discourse by citing a famous midrash about Abraham’s teaching his radical new belief in the one God to the guests he would invite and feed in his tent. Let’s first look at the biblical story, then the midrashic commentary, and then Manitou’s interpretation of it. In Genesis, the Bible describes Abraham’s various wanderings, one of which involves a stay in Beersheva: “And he [Abraham] planted a tamarisk tree (*eshel* אֶשֶׁל) in Beersheva; and he called (*va-yikra*) there on the name of the Lord (*Havayeh*), the Everlasting God (*El Olam*).”²⁷

In the midrashic commentary to this story, the ancient Rabbis characteristically probe this seemingly simple verse and ask: What was this tamarisk tree that Abraham planted, and why was it so important to note its name? What’s the relation between the first and second part of the verse, between this tree and Abraham’s calling there on the name of God? What do the different Hebrew names used for God (*Havayeh*) and (*El Olam*) here mean? The Rabbis offer answers by playing on the words and letters for “tamarisk-tree” (*eshel*), and those for the verb “to call” (from the Hebrew root קרא “*kara*”). There are various versions of this midrash, but here is the most well-known and complete from the Talmud, *Sotah* 10a–b:²⁸

“And he [Abraham] planted a tamarisk tree (*eshel*) in Beersheba” [Gen 21:33]. Resh Lakish said: “This teaches that Abraham made an orchard (*pardes*) and planted in it all kinds of choice fruits.”

R. Yehudah and R. Nehemiah disagree over this interpretation: One of them said that it was an orchard (*pardes*). The other said that it was an inn for lodging [*pundak*—also interpreted elsewhere as the Hebrew word *eshel*: אֶשֶׁל, the letters *alef*, *shin*, *lamed* as an acronym for *akhilah*, *shtiyah*, *linah*: “food, drink, lodging.”]

Now, we could accept the reasoning of the one who argued it was an orchard, because the Biblical verse here says: “and he planted.” But in the opposing argument—that it was an inn—what could the verb “and he *planted*” mean?—But actually, there is also proof for that interpretation of the verb [“and he planted”] because, it is also written elsewhere in the Bible, “And he shall *plant* the tents of his palace . . .” (Daniel 11:45) [using the word “planting” for “tents”].

“And he called there on the name of the Lord (*Havayeh*), the Everlasting God (*El Olam*).” Resh Lakish said: “Don’t read/vocalize it as ‘and he called’ (וַיִּקְרָא *va-yikra*)—but instead as ‘and he made to call’ (וַיִּקְרֵא *va-yakr* ‘i).”

This teaches that our father Abraham caused [וַיִּקְרֵא] the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, to be uttered by the mouth of every passer-by [*hikr* ‘i; lit “he caused to call”]. How so? After his guests, the travelers, had eaten and drunk, they stood up to bless Abraham. But he said to them, “Did you eat of what was mine? You ate of that which belongs to the God of the Universe (*El Olam*). Thank, praise and bless the One who spoke and created the universe.” [interpolations mine]

At first glance, the midrash is enigmatic and confusing: Why does it interpret the Biblical verse of Gen. 21:33 non-literally? Why interpret the tamarisk tree (*eshel*) as an orchard of fruits, or an inn, or a tent? And how do those places—meant to attract and serve guests—relate to the next part of the verse about Abraham’s calling on the name of God as *El Olam*? “*El Olam*” can be translated as either “Everlasting God,” or more literally “God of all the world” (in Hebrew, *olam* can mean both “world” and “everlasting”).

Manitou proposes the following interpretation, in line with his thoughts above on God, food, ethics, and philosophy: Abraham does not instruct his guests through intellectual argument or philosophical speculation. Instead, he teaches by personally giving them hospitality and food (not forgetting the potatoes). Then he directs his guests to thank the One to whom they owe the meal, to thank the One who “perpetuates their being” as creatures. In other words, he makes them discover God as their Creator, the Being who endows them with being. Food, which enables them to perpetuate their existence, helps them recognize God as the Being who gave them that existence. In sum, he writes, “the midrash makes the fact of feeding and nourishment the vehicle of religious experience.”²⁹

Or, to put it another way, food becomes a way of "imagining the Jewish God." Food creates a relation to and recognition of the Creator and of my personal Creator—not through abstract philosophical speculation but embodied practice, including verbal blessing and the social practice of sharing it with others. As Elyakim Simsovic, one of Manitou's veteran students and editors, puts it:

Eating contains the passing on of creation, is continuation of creation. I connect eating to the Creator. To eat is to know I am created. I owe my existence to somebody else, to another. Abraham recognized *his* creator. The Creator made a place for me in his world; to invite guests is to give them a place in my world, and therefore is the ultimate kindness. Abraham sat and shared with others in eating.³⁰

THE PERFECT MEAL: FOOD AS PLEASURE AND FOOD AS ATONEMENT

"When the Holy Temple was in existence, the Altar atoned for Israel; today, a person's table atones for him."³¹

M. F. K. Fisher concluded the famous quotation I cited above with the words, "We must eat. If, in the face of that dread fact, we can find other nourishment, and tolerance and compassion for it, we'll be no less full of human dignity. There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine drunk."³² In Manitou's comments on the first chapters of the book of Leviticus, he explores some of those more "dread" aspects of eating. Whereas "*Foi et morale*" deals with philosophy and its discontents, with the relation of food, ontology, and ethics, the essay on Leviticus adds more psychological, economic and anthropological dimensions. Indeed, what about the economic aspects of food production and consumption? How do we understand the archaic sacrificial food rituals of the Jerusalem Temple? And what is the role of appetite and pleasure in eating?

In "*Foi et morale*" he writes that "the meal in itself is the very basis of the rituals of faith . . . the liturgy of the creature recognizing and acknowledging himself as such," for "[t]o eat is the very gesture of life"—of being given existence and of maintaining one's life.³³ But in his comments on Leviticus, there is a new twist: our basic need to eat inevitably entangles us in economic and moral dilemmas, in various faults and "sins." How so? In a nod to Freud, Manitou notes that an appetite for pleasure is part of our fundamental nature; it assures the functioning of biological life, and allows for self-consciousness. In a nod to Marx, he adds that this appetite for pleasure thrusts us into an economic problem, which becomes a moral problem: we have to satisfy these in-

stincts and hungers necessary for our survival in the world, *along with others who also need to maintain their existence*. So there is inevitable competition and conflict. The ethical problem arises when there is more than one person in the world. As soon as there are two, there is competition; Cain and Abel are the paradigm of this dynamic.³⁴

Now comes his interesting redefinition of the nature, origin, and responsibility for sin: "Every offense or error, of whatever sort, comes from the fact that our essential nature involves an appetite for pleasure. But that appetite is necessary to ensure the functioning of our physical life; and that physical life enables our consciousness."³⁵ No wonder, then, that in the Bible, the first "sin" of the first human being is connected to food. In other words, "we're exposed to the constant risk of fault by the simple fact of living life in the world."³⁶ Clearly, his definition is a refutation of Christian notions of "original sin." Instead, Manitou gives us a kind of existential-theological "Catch-22": We're beings created by God and placed in a world with others who also must also sustain their existence. And now the urgent question becomes: How does Judaism resolve this contradiction?

Manitou's answer, once again: *food!* Jewish law compensates for this existential, moral, and economic problem through the Temple ritual, which he now describes as a "meal, in the obtaining of which, no fault has been committed."³⁷ The book of Leviticus gives us lengthy descriptions of the sacrificial meals in the Temple. The ritual of "expiation" (*kapparah*), observes Manitou, essentially consists of the consummation either by fire or in a "meal of reconciliation" (*shlamim*) of things that form the basis of human nourishment: "As a religion of moral law and way of sanctity, the Torah foresees that if a sin is not expressly intended, but proceeds from the influence of the life-instincts on the will, it can be 'expiated.'"³⁸ Furthermore, the Hebrew words *kapparah* and *korban* don't have the same connotations of "expiation" and "sacrifice" as in Christian theology where they are derived from Latin. The more literal and accurate meaning of the Hebrew word "*kapparah*" is "covered" or "recovered"; the Hebrew word for "sacrifice"—*korban*—comes from the verb to "draw close."

In Manitou's anthropologically inflected interpretation, a Jew can again "draw close" to the holiness of God, and "cover the existential fault" by participating in the ritual of the Temple, by associating with the "meal for which no sin is been committed."³⁹ In a further nod to Marx, Manitou also observes that the "*kodashim*, the consecrated food offerings, have been removed from the 'market economy of exchange and surplus value.'"⁴⁰ How so? The priestly classes, the Levites and Cohanim, were forbidden from engaging in the normal economic activities of work and production to obtain their sustenance. The ordinary Jew supported them and participated in

the Temple rituals by bringing the tithes from his or her own profits, flocks, grains, or fruits. These offerings were slaughtered or burned on the Temple altar, and in certain cases partially eaten by the priests.

In Manitou's description, the High Priest in the Jerusalem Temple is then the "perfect man, dressed in perfect garments, in the perfect house, nourished by the perfect meal."⁴¹ And the religious intention of the ordinary Jew who participates in this ritual is then: "[I]f we could live or emulate the holiness of the Cohen [the priest] who is exempt from the risks of the economic life, our meal would also be without fault." Each member of the community associates with the priest in bringing *korbanot*, and so participates in his ritual. The result: "a renewed and clear conscience."⁴²

So when Leviticus 19:2 says, "You shall be holy because I the Lord your God am holy," it is simultaneously a promise and a commandment for all Israel. After the destruction of the Temple, the Pharisees saved Judaism by transferring the holiness of the ritual Temple meal to everyone's home; the private, domestic table becomes the substitute for the altar and prayers take the place of sacrifices. As the Talmud says, "When the Holy Temple was in existence, the altar atoned for Israel; today, a person's table atones for him."⁴³ In sum, Manitou has taken Biblical material about Temple rituals and meals quite foreign to a modern reader and translated it into the language of anthropology, psychology, and economics to demonstrate how certain kinds of eating become Jewish religious material practices that help us connect to, imagine, and be at peace with God and our fellows.

CONCLUSION: TASTE [TA'AMU] AND SEE THAT GOD IS GOOD⁴⁴

In this essay I have placed myself mostly in the role of explicator of Manitou's ideas. I'll let the reader judge for her or himself how persuasive and attractive they are. But I'd like to conclude with a few personal reflections about the relation of what I've written above to how we feed and nourish ourselves today. As Ruth Reichl puts it so well: "While half the world goes hungry, the other half is killing itself with calories."⁴⁵ In researching my university courses on Food and Literature, I've become increasingly alarmed about the degradation of our soil, and of the animals, plants and drink that come to our tables/altars through modern industrial food production—along with the terrible cruelty to animals in what is euphemistically called "factory farming."

Many eloquent books have been written about these issues by authors such as Michael Pollan, Jonathan Safran Foer, Eric Schlosser, and Marion Nestle.⁴⁶ But we also need our spiritual traditions to restore the balance, and to think

more deeply about ways in which we "imagine God through food." As Gandhi once poignantly put it: "[T]he millions who have to go without two meals a day? To them God can only appear as bread and butter."⁴⁷

In our midrash, Abraham is the model figure who ensures that not just his close ones but also strangers are sought out, welcomed in and fed. Those who sat under his *eshel* tree, at his inn and table, then come to recognize and bless the ultimate Source of all nourishment. As Elyakim Simsovic put it, "The Creator made a place for me in his world; to invite guests is to give them a place in my world, and therefore is the ultimate kindness." Whether we are theologians and philosophers or not, believers or not, whether we agree intellectually with Manitou's ideas above or not—we can all surely sense how the delicate web of life on earth is endangered.

Manitou writes eloquently elsewhere how there is so much more to this web than a set of physical nutrients in a food chain. "Taste [*ta'am*]" and see that God is good,"⁴⁸ proclaims a familiar verse read in the Jewish Sabbath morning prayers. Comments Manitou on this verse—and I think M. F. K. Fisher would readily assent—

Food is not only a physical nourishment, it also has a taste. And this taste is the blessing in nature. It's the source of the fragrance of flowers. For the flower is not just a flower, or the sexual organ of the plant, but it has a scent, a perfume. A fruit is not just a source of nourishment; it also has a taste. This is the taste of life. The taste, that is, isn't just another ordinary "natural" phenomenon; it's the blessing—the excess beyond the purely natural. This blessing is so abundant in the world, that we think it's simply another part of nature. But it suffices for someone to lose their ability to taste in order to understand what is missing.⁴⁹

The Hebrew word for taste—*ta'am*—is also the same word as "reason." In eating, we come to understand.

I've presented Manitou here in a somewhat dry and academic way. He was, however, a master pedagogue whose lectures were filled with humor and warm interactions with the audience, a true teacher of the living "Oral Torah" which can't ever really be captured in writing. I'd like to end with a "taste" of that teaching: one of his favorite stories, told in his oral lectures.

I'm going to tell you a Hassidic story that I have often recounted. It has to do with a yeshiva student who had religious doubts.

There are also those who have half-doubts, "*hatzi-doute*" [Manitou's Hebrew-French play on the Hebrew word "Hassidut," i.e. "Hassidic philosophy." *Hatzi* means "half" in Hebrew; *doute* means "doubt" in French.]

But his doubt was total, complete doubt. He couldn't study anymore. He didn't know why any longer; he had no motivation.

So his colleagues had pity on him, and one said to him: "There's a certain Tzaddik [Jewish holy man, saint] in such and such a village. Go see him and ask him your questions. You believe; you don't believe. But decide already!"

He went to the house of the Tzaddik. The Tzaddik was eating at his table. He made him sit down on a chair. He didn't say anything. He continued to eat peacefully.

That lasted an hour. Then the yeshiva student got up and left.

He returned to his yeshiva. All the students of the yeshiva were at the door because they wanted to know the answer to his questions.

"So, what did he say to you?"

"He didn't say anything to me, but I saw him eat. Now I can continue studying."

In other words, if the Tzaddik eats, everything is possible. You understand why, for Hassidim, the food of the Tzaddik, the Tzaddik's nourishment—is not nothing.⁵⁰

A final personal note. I live in Jerusalem, surrounded so often by violence and war, difficult news and worries. After I finished writing those words, and then looked at some extremely threatening news on the Internet, I went out to visit a friend. As I passed all the cafés lining the streets of my neighborhood and saw the people happily eating and enjoying, my spirits lifted and my anxieties dissolved. I thought of this story. Everything, indeed, is possible.

NOTES

1. Rev. J. T. Pettee, "Prayer and Potatoes," sermon in Meriden, Connecticut, 1880. Accessed January 6, 2016: <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:285856/>

2. Reichel, Ruth. "Why Food Matters," 24. Accessed July 30, 2015: http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/r/Reichl_2007.pdf.

3. *Midrash Exodus Rabbah* 41:3

4. Susan Handelman, "Make Yourself a Teacher": *Rabbinic Tales of Mentors and Disciples* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 9–10.

5. See, for example, recent academic work on Judaism and food such as *Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages* by David Kraemer (New York: Routledge, 2008) and Jordan Rosenblum's *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), "Kosher Olive Oil in Antiquity Reconsidered," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 40 (2009): 356–365, and "Why Do You Refuse to Eat Pork?": Jews, Food, and Identity in Roman Palestine," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100.1 (Winter 2010): 95–110, amongst other books and articles; best-selling art cookbooks like Ottolenghi and Tamimi's *Jerusalem: A Cookbook* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2012) and Roden's *The Book of Jewish Food: An Odyssey from Samakrand and Vilan to the Present Day* (New York: Penguin, 1996); and general theoretical collections like Counihan and Van Esterik's *Food and Culture: A Reader*,

3rd edition (New York: Routledge, 2012), the special issue on "Food Theory" in *Pre/Text: A Journal of Rhetorical Theory*, eds. Victor J. Vitanza, Jenny Edbauer Rice and Jeff Rice, 22.1–4 (Spring–Winter 2001) and the special food issue of *College English* 70.4 (March 2008).

6. W. H. Auden, Introduction to *The Art of Eating*, in *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose: Volume V, 1963–1968*, edited by Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 37–42. Originally published as "The Kitchen Life" in *The Griffin* 7.6 (June 1958).

7. M. F. K. Fisher, "Once a Tramp, Always . . ." in *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, edited by Philip Lopate (New York: Anchor, 1995), 546.

8. M. F. K. Fisher, "The Gastronomical Me," in *The Art of Eating: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 353. As Susan Derwin comments: "Fisher's power to transform food into a metaphoric language came from what she knew about her own hunger and what she believed to be true of hunger in general: that it was its own kind of metaphor; that it was the expression of desires that no food could ever satisfy." See Susan Derwin, "Poetics of M.F. K. Fisher," *Style* 37.3 (Fall 2003): 266. Accessed July 30, 2015, <http://labs.jstor.org/demo/stable/10.5325/style.37.3.266>.

9. Yéhouda Léon Askénazi, *La Parole et L'Écrit: Penser la vie juive aujourd'hui*, edited by Marcel Goldman (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 369. Unless otherwise specified, all English translations are my own.

10. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste, or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, translated by M. F. K. Fisher (New York: Knopf, 2009), 15.

11. Rav Marc Kujavski, annual Passover lectures in Jerusalem, most recently April 1, 2015.

12. In an autobiographical essay, Manitou describes the unique Jewish culture of his youth: "We prayed in Hebrew; and the Hebrew of the prayers linked us to the Hebrew past of the Bible. Our emotional affectivity was shared between Arabic melody and Spanish folklore; and our cultural language was French." "L'histoire de ma vie," in *Un Hébreu d'origine juive, hommage au Rav Yéhouda Léon Askénazi Manitou*, edited by Michel Koginsky (Jerusalem: Éditions Ormaya, 1998), 24. His own family background was also a multicultural mix: his mother's family descended from Spanish Jews, including many great kabbalists, among which was his Sephardic grandfather, Hayyim ibn Tubul, descendent of one of the main disciples of the "Ari," R. Yitzhak Luria. His father's rabbinic line came to Algeria, some centuries earlier from Poland and a line of great Talmudists (including the "Rosh," R. Asher ben Yehiel). Very early in life, he came to know, as he puts it, "two different cultural styles: that of Algerian Jews who in lived in an Algerian and Judeo-Arabic manner; and that of Jews of a European style." *Ibid.*, 25.

13. By the 1960s, most of the other Jews and Europeans also left Oran due to the Algerian War of Independence. His father, R. David Askénazi, was the last Chief Rabbi of Algeria. Manitou studied, taught in, and later became the director of the newly established School for Young Jewish Leadership in Orsay near Paris (*L'École des Cadres Gilbert-Bloch d'Orsay* 1946–1969), which became the center of French-

Jewish intellectual and spiritual renewal and the seed of the "Parisian School of Jewish Thought" (*L'École de Pensée Juive de Paris*). Though Manitou was a luminous thinker, educator, philosopher, and kabbalist, Elie Wiesel's recollections of him above all were of Manitou's voice, singing and teaching to Wiesel haunting Judeo-Arab chants. Wiesel taught him, in return, the Chassidic *niggunim* of Eastern Europe. Elie Wiesel, "Son chant, je m'en souviens," in *Un Hébreu d'origine juive, hommage au Rav Yéhouda Léon Askénazi Manitou*, edited by Michel Koginsky (Jerusalem: Éditions Ormaya, 1998), 82.

14. Yéhouda Léon Askénazi, "L'histoire de ma vie," 29–30. At Gordin's request, Manitou dedicated himself entirely to teaching Judaism and had no more time for his studies in philosophy. Manitou chose not to have a university career: "I never considered myself an academic, but as a Rabbi teaching the Jewish tradition to academics. In order to do that, it was necessary to know general philosophy." "L'histoire de ma vie," 31.

15. To understand Gordin's influence and methodology just a bit more, it's helpful to briefly note the difference in the ways Manitou and Levinas related Judaism to philosophy. Levinas often said that his own goal was to translate Jewish wisdom "into the Greek language which, thanks to assimilation, we have learned in the West. Our great task is to express in Greek those principles about which Greece knew nothing." See Emmanuel Levinas, "Assimilation and New Culture," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Beyond the Verse; Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, translated by Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 200. Manitou's implicit critique was that the Jewish element becomes lost in the translation, Hellenized. See especially Manitou's essays "Y a-t-il une philosophe juive?" in *La Parole et L'Écrit*, 29–40 and "Les nostalgies de Dieu" in *La Parole et L'Écrit*, 41–54. I have no space here to delve into this complex matter, but see further my essay "The Philosopher, the Rabbi, and the Rhetorician," *College English* 72.6 (July 2010): 592–607.

16. Askénazi, "Jacob Gordin, mon maître," in *Jacob Gordin, Écrits: renouveau de la pensée juive en France*, edited by Marcel Goldmann (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 14.

17. Manitou not only became the director of Orsay but used his talents to found and direct several other Jewish communal and academic institutions in France. Responding once to André Neher's urging him to write a book, Manitou answered, "Let's make a deal: You create the books and I'll create the readers." Quoted in Shlomo Aviner, *Pirurum me-Shukhan Gavoah: me-Torato Shel ha-Rav Yéhouda Léon Askénazi Manitou* (Bet El: Chava, 1991), 24. In 1968, in the third phase of his life, he emigrated to Israel, where he continued his educational projects. His Israeli-Zionist identity had been awakened in 1957 upon visits there with his students, and meetings in Jerusalem with the kabbalist, R. Zvi Yehuda Kook, to whom he became closely attached. R. Kook called Manitou "*Meor ha-Golah shel doreinu*" (the "Luminary of the Exile of our generation") and said of him, "he is greater than all his teachers." Quoted in Michel Koginsky, "En une seule nuit," in *Un Hébreu d'origine juive, hommage au Rav Yéhouda Léon Askénazi Manitou*, edited by Michel Koginsky (Jerusalem: Éditions Ormaya, 1998), 88.

18. Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 10a-b

19. Yéhouda Léon Askénazi, "Foi et morale," in *Ki Mitsion II Le calendrier hébraïque—(les mo'adim)* (Paris: Foundation Manitou, 1999), 37–38.

20. Ibid., 39.

21. Ibid.

22. As I noted previously, after the decimation of French Jewry in World War II and widespread assimilation afterwards, one of Manitou's major goals was to create a cadre of committed young Jewish intellectuals and community leaders to rebuild Jewish life in France. He needed to speak their language, address their dilemmas about identity and meaning, and present Judaism as a serious answer to contemporary competing trends of thought. Among the main philosophical currents exciting French intellectuals at that time were Heideggerian phenomenology, existentialism, Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxism, and Structuralism. For Heidegger, the essential question of philosophy is the "question of being," and the nature of the mortal human being who is thrown into the world (*dasein*) of temporality. Here is not the place to engage the complexities of Heidegger's thought or those other intellectual currents. I mention this only as brief background for Manitou's using terms like "immediate intuitions of Jewish consciousness" and "our manner of being in the world" to discuss food. The main point is his use of the Heideggerian phenomenological language as a tool, which he then transforms through a Jewish ethical critique: he links that "mode of being" not to any "tragic" finitude, but to our positive nature as creatures given the gift of existence by God and invested with a moral task. In this context, it's worth briefly noting that before World War II, Levinas—Manitou's other great Jewish philosophical counterpart in post-War France—had been deeply influenced by Heidegger. After Heidegger joined the Nazi party and was appointed by the Nazis as Rector of Freiburg in 1934 (for which he never apologized), Levinas wrote of needing to leave the climate of Heidegger's philosophy, and also helped reconstruct Jewish thought for the shattered French community. I have written elsewhere of how Manitou and Levinas, each with his own particular Jewish sensibility, critiqued Heidegger's impersonal notion of being, and put the question of ethics and the "other" back at the center of philosophy. (On Levinas, see my *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Scholem, Benjamin, and Levinas* [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991]). In one of his Talmudic lectures on "forgiveness in Jewish tradition," given at the "Colloquium of Jewish Intellectuals," Levinas once said, "One can forgive many Germans, but there are some Germans it is difficult to forgive. It is difficult to forgive Heidegger." See Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 25. These annual colloquia, beginning in 1957, were led by the Orsay group, with Manitou also always present and speaking along with Levinas.

23. Askénazi, "Foi et morale," 38.

24. Quoted in Michel Koginsky "Quelques Perles," in *Un Hébreu d'origine juive, hommage au Rav Yéhouda Léon Askénazi Manitou*, edited by Michel Koginsky (Jerusalem: Éditions Ormaya, 1998), 135.

25. Askénazi, "Foi et morale," 38.

26. Sandra M. Gilbert, *The Culinary Imagination: From Myth to Modernity* (New York: Norton, 2014), 26. In contrast, I am reminded of a famous, poignant Talmudic

story in *Bava Metzia* 85a about R. Yehuda ha Nasi, the second-century leader and compiler of the Mishna. One day as he was walking, a calf en route to slaughter ran to take refuge under his robes and bellowed as if to say, "Save me!" Responded R. Yehuda, "Go! What can I do for you? For this you were created." It was then decreed in Heaven, relates the Talmud, that since he showed no pity for the calf, suffering would be brought upon him, and he suffered various maladies for thirteen years. One day, a maidservant in his house was cleaning a room and found some newly-born weasel pups. She wanted to put them out of the house, but he restrained her, saying, "Let them be. God's compassion is over all God's creatures [Ps. 145:9], and human beings must follow his example." It was then declared in Heaven that since he was now compassionate, so too should pity be taken on him and he was immediately cured.

27. Gen 21:33.

28. For other versions, see *Sotah* 19a-b; *Bereishit Rabbah* 39:16, 43:7, 49:54; 54:6; *Avot de Rabbi Natan* 7:14; *Tanhuma* 58:14; *Midrash Sochar Tov* 37:110; *Yalkut Shimoni* 95; *Tanhuma* "Lekh" 121; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 25.

29. Askénazi, "Foi et morale," 39. There's another unspoken subtext to Manitou's interpretation of this famous midrash: his argument with Maimonides's opposite interpretation of this verse. For Maimonides, Abraham is a paradigmatic philosopher who reasoned his way to faith in the One God and employed logic in arguing with those whom he wanted to convert (*Guide to the Perplexed* 3:29, *Mishneh Torah* Laws of Idolatry 1:1 et al.) Indeed, the verse, "He called there on the name of the Lord (*Ha-vayeh*), the Everlasting God (*El Olam*)" is so important for Maimonides that he places it at the beginning of each of the three parts of his *Guide for the Perplexed*. Eight hundred years after Maimonides, Manitou had to be a Guide for the Perplexed of his own generation and its different set of problems. There is no space here to discuss their differing attitudes towards philosophy, prophecy, and kabbalah—and especially towards Greek philosophy, and its role in Jewish thought.

30. Elyakim Simsovic, notes from a personal conversation in Jerusalem, February 11, 2015.

31. Talmud, *Berakhot* 55a

32. M. F. K. Fisher, "The Gastronomical Me," in *The Art of Eating: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 353.

33. Askénazi, "Foi et morale," 39.

34. He writes at length elsewhere about Cain and Abel as the paradigm of this conflict, the conflict between siblings, which plays itself out in various permutations in the rest of the book of Genesis. I further explain his difference from Levinas' analysis and definition of ethics in my essay, "The Philosopher, the Rabbi, and the Rhetorician."

35. Yéhoua Léon Askénazi, "*Vayiqra*" *Ki Mitsion I: notes sur la paracha* (Paris: Foundation Manitou, 1999), 215. See also his essay on Lev 6:1–8, in "Tsav," in *Ki Mitsion I notes sur la paracha* (Paris: Foundation Manitou, 1999), 223–25.

36. Ibid.

37. Askénazi, "*Vayiqra*," 215–16.

38. Ibid., 223–24

39. Ibid., 215–16.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid., 223–25.

43. Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 55a.

44. Ps. 34:9

45. Reichl, "Why Food Matters," 14.

46. Michael Pollan, *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009). Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2009). Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001). Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

47. Muhattma Gandhi, *Young India*, 25 Oct 1931.

48. Ps. 34:9. On a broader philosophical level, Manitou notes that here are two opposite dimensions to human existence: the "what" (*mah*), one's physical body, given over to deterministic natural law; and the "who" (*mi*), one's consciousness, soul, and intellect. The physical connection between the world and the person is food. As the Biblical narrative writes, "And in the sweat of your brow, you shall eat bread" (Gen 13:19). Food is the world that is transformed into the human; when someone ceases eating, he or she first loses the "who," and then the "what" through death. Yéhoua Léon Askénazi, *Sod ha-Ivri: Yesodot ha-Emunah L'Ohr Pesukei ha-Torah, Vol I*, translated (Hebrew) by Gavriela ben Shmuel and edited by Israel Pibko (Bet El: Chava, 2004).

49. Yéhoua Léon Askénazi, "La notion de prière dans la liturgie juive," in *La Parole et L'Écrit: Penser la vie juive aujourd'hui*, volume II (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005), 541. Manitou extends the definition of food elsewhere as "not only bread and meat, but everything that creates pleasure for our consciousness" (*La Parole et L'Écrit*, 408). In "Foi et morale" he adds that "every gesture of life returns to the fact of food for the Spirit as well as for the body" (*Foi et morale*, 39). Fisher well understood that the human soul needs the nourishment of special meals to face the existential struggles of life. Her language, though, is not that of philosophical phenomenology or psychoanalysis, Marx or Midrash, or any traditional theology, but personal, feminine, intimate, vulnerable, born out of her own human pain and search for meaning. "I believe that one of the most dignified ways we are capable of, to assert and then reassert our dignity in the face of poverty and war's fears and pains, is to nourish ourselves with all possible skill, delicacy, and ever-increasing enjoyment. And with our gastronomical growth will come, inevitably, knowledge and perception of a hundred other things, but mainly of ourselves. Then Fate, even tangled as it is with cold wars as well as hot, cannot harm us." M. F. K. Fisher, "How to Cook a Wolf," in *The Art of Eating: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 350.

50. I thank Elyakim Simsovic, who has an archive of many tapes of Manitou's lectures, for sharing this transcription and story with me. I have translated it here from the French. It comes from a class Manitou gave on the weekly liturgical Biblical reading *Parshat Ki Tissa* (Ex 30:11–34:35) in 1990. Hassidim have a tradition of receiving what's called *shirayim*, small leftovers of the Rebbe's food that the Rebbe

gives out to them. My colleague Ora Wiskind Elper comments on the last line of this story: "I think this has a double meaning too—what he eats and what he gives others. That's literally the *shirayim*, both."

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