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Parashat Pinhas

July 12, 2014. Susan Handelman starts with hunger for love, moves through the ethics of sacrifices, and ends with eating as a profound enactment of our connection to the world.

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PARASHAT PINHAS

Leket Israel and Parashat Pinhas:

After the destruction of the Temple, the holiness of the ritual Temple meal was extended to every Jewish home; prayers took the place of sacrifices and the altar became the kitchen table. For those who accept it, this idea adds a whole new dimension to what makes hunger intolerable and why Leket Israel is dedicated to eradicating it.



Hungry For Love?

Susan Handelman

Professor Susan Handelman teaches in the English Department at Bar-Ilan University, Israel, where she teaches a course on Food and Literature. Her many publications on Jewish themes include The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory (1982), Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem and Levinas (1991), and Make Yourself a Teacher: Rabbinic Tales of Mentors and Disciples (2011).

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 to 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."

MFKFisher, "Foreword," *The Gastronomical Me*

That's one of the most famous quotes in the history of food writing, by a pioneer in the field, the eminent American writer Mary Francis Kennedy Fisher. I always read it aloud at the beginning and conclusion of a university course I teach on "Food for Thought: Food and Literature." MFK Fisher was far ahead of her time when she began writing about food in the 1920's. Academia has just caught up with her and made "Food Studies" a respected part of the curriculum.

But our Rabbis understood long, long ago that food is always about something else, that every meal has a story, and every story about food has a subtext. They saw in the "dread fact that we must eat" a deep spiritual meaning. Or, as Rabbi Marc Kujavski, the Talmudic scholar I study with, puts it, our ancient Sages understood that "in order to change your consciousness, you have to change your menu." Granted, he's French. He is also inverting his countryman Descartes' famous pronouncement "I think, therefore I am." I would like to reflect on this week's parasha in light of the insights of some contemporary food writers, and another modern French Jew, Rabbi Léon Askénazi (1922-1996, also known as Manitou), a leader of post-war French Jewry who also analyzes the Jewish relation to food, faith, and philosophy.

So where is the food in our parasha, Pinchas? Pinchas comes after the high drama of the previous week's episodes: Balak and Bilaam's talking donkey; curses turned to blessings; the people's committing sexually idolatrous sins with the Midianite and Moabite women, and a subsequent punishing plague. One of the sinning couples is caught in flagrante delicto in front of the Tent of Meeting. Pinchas takes his spear and kills them both in one fell swoop, leading to the end of plague, which has killed 24,000. Our parasha opens in the aftermath. The narrative pace suddenly slows; we catch our breath. Pinchas receives the covenant of peace and priesthood. God then commands Moses to take a post-plague census of all males 20 years old and upwards who are eligible for military service. We are now in the last 11 chapters of the book of BeMidbar; the Israelites are preparing for war with the Midianites and entrance of the new generation in the Promised Land.

After the census God directs Moses about how to divide the Land for an inheritance among the tribes and clans. Then comes the poignant short scene in which God informs Moses he will soon die, shows him from the top of Mount Avarim the Land he will never enter, and appoints Joshua as his successor.

Now come two long chapters on food. They are prefaced by Numbers 28:1-2: "And God spoke to Moses, saying: Command the children of Israel and say to them: 'My offering, My food for my offerings made by fire, for a sweet savour to me, carefully observe to offer me in its due season.'" Chapters 28 and 29 set up the public calendar for the sacrificial system to be enacted in the Land. We are given long lists and exhaustive details of sacrifices from animal, meal, and drink... the specific offerings for each day, for the sabbath, New Moon, and all the major festivals from Passover, Shavuot, through Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Sukkot. The material from these two chapters was also put into the Jewish liturgy as extra reading on those festivals;

each list is read on its appropriate holiday. Jewish tradition holds that God counts our reading of these passages as equal to our bringing the offerings to the Temple. Still, we seem to be lacking any of the elevated thoughts of MFK Fisher here.

So let's first take a step back to consider why food is such a key vehicle for religious consciousness, and then afterwards explore further meanings of the sacrificial meals in the Temple. Rabbi Askénazi, in analyzing the religious significance of food, stresses that Jewish tradition knows and speaks of God first of all as the Creator. That's where the Bible begins its first words, and that also establishes our essential mode of being in a world as "creature." The foundation of moral consciousness also begins here: to recognize oneself as created, as given existence gratuitously by the Creator. The project of our lives, then, becomes to morally earn that existence. Food, the need constantly to nourish and sustain ourselves, reminds us of our finitude in a way that no abstract philosophy can.

Philosophical or rational proofs for the existence of God via the idea of creation are secondary important clarifications, Rabbi Askénazi notes. They can follow varying intellectual trends; they can be more or less persuasive to various intellectual elites. But they can't serve as a means of primary religious consciousness accessible to everyone. As he puts it: "that fundamental experience of being created comes from the fact that a person has to eat in order to live"; "the presence of the highest values depend, at the end of the day, on the fact of physical and food... that's a philosophical scandal and true mystery." ("Foi et Morale", Ki Mitsion II: les mo'adim, pp. 37-41)

There are two seemingly opposite dimensions to human existence, he notes: the "what" (mah), one's physical body given over to deterministic natural law; and the "who" (mi), one's consciousness, and intellect. The physical connection between the world and the person is food, "And in the sweat of your brow, you shall eat bread"(Genesis 13:19). Food is the world that is transformed into the human. When a person ceases eating, he or she first loses the "who," and then the "what" through death (Sod ha-Ivri, pp. 62-64).

Yes, even the philosopher has to eat. Without that nourishment, there is neither "I think" nor "I am." MFK Fisher, from a secular point of view, calls this "the dread fact" that we must eat. But in Jewish sensibility this need is the very gateway to faith and moral consciousness. That's why, Rabbi Askénazi, continues, the famous midrash in Genesis Rabbah 30:8 describes Abraham teaching his new faith in the Creator and One God through inviting guests to his tent, feeding them, and redirecting them to thank -- not him-- but God, who is the source of creation and existence. Food, which enables them to perpetuate their existence, helps them to recognize God as the Being who gave them that existence.

How does the formal sacrificial system of food offerings relate to all the above? The early chapters of Leviticus set forth other parts of the sacrificial system dealing with expiation of sins. In his commentary on these passages, Rabbi Askénazi writes that every offense or error, of whatever sort, comes from the fact that our essential nature involves an appetite for pleasure (that is, yetzer ha ra). But that appetite is necessary to ensure the functioning of our physical life; and that physical life enables our consciousness. So we are inevitably thrust into an economic and moral problem as we try to satisfy our hungers. In other words, we're exposed to the constant risk of fault by the simple fact of living life in the world. No wonder, then, that in the biblical narrative, the first sin of the first human (Adam) is inevitably tied to a problem involving food. Let it be clear, though: this not any doctrine of "original sin" but an existential condition of our being as created by God and placed in a world with others who also need to sustain their existence.

MFK Fisher's "dread fact that we must eat" also includes many "wild, more insistent hungers." If, "in the face of that dread fact," she continues, "we find other nourishment, and

tolerance and compassion for it, we'll be no less full of human dignity." But how does one do that? Rabbi Askénazi gives a surprising answer. Jewish law, he argues, compensates for the existential moral and economic problem through the Temple ritual, which is that of a "meal, in the obtaining of which, no fault has been committed." The kodashim, the consecrated food offerings, have been removed from the market economy of exchange and surplus value. In this sense, he continues, one could describe the cult of the High Priest of the Temple of Jerusalem as the "perfect man, dressed in perfect garments, in the perfect house, nourished by the perfect meal." In other words, "if we could live or emulate the holiness of the priest exempted from the risks of the economic life, our meal would also be without fault." The ordinary Jew participates by bringing these sacrifices to the Temple priests from his own flocks or grains or fruits. These offerings are then slaughtered or burned on the Temple altar, and in certain cases partially eaten by the priests. In Rabbi Askénazi's view, the entire act produces a certain form of consciousness; it creates the possibility for an existence untainted by the existential moral and economic problem, and allows for renewed good conscience (KiMiTzion: Notes sur la Paracha, vol 1; pp. 215-217; 223-225).

Leviticus 19:2 says, "You shall be holy because I the Lord your God am holy." It is simultaneously a promise and a commandment. Holiness becomes the model for all Israel.

After the destruction of the Temple, the Pharisees saved Judaism by extending the holiness of the ritual Temple meal to every Jewish home; the table becomes the substitute for the altar; prayers take the place of sacrifices, and so forth.

What do we do today, however, when the animals, plants, and drink that come to our tables/ altars have become dangerously degraded through modern industrial food production and factory farming? When the soil has become contaminated due to chemical alteration; when what are euphemistically called "confinement animal feeding operations" raise animals for slaughter in extremely cruel and environmentally damaging conditions? According to Jonathan Safran Foer, "Animal agriculture makes a 40% greater contribution to global warming than all transportation in the world combined; it is the number one cause of climate change" (Eating Animals, p. 42). What do we do when despite all our advances in producing more food more cheaply, almost a billion people go hungry, and so many affluent Westerners fall ill due to diseases connecting to overeating? Food writer Ruth Reichel puts it so well: "While half the world goes hungry, the other half is killing itself with calories" ("Why Food Matters," The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, p. 14). http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/r/Reichl_2007.pdf

We need our religious traditions to help us restore the balance; to make sure, as Abraham did, that others are sought out, welcomed in and fed; that those who sit at our tables and worship with us recognize and bless the ultimate Source of all nourishment. We need to remember the precariousness of our condition as creatures, and our responsibility to protect the delicate web of life on earth that sustains us. And yes, we need also to satisfy our hungers; there will always be economic and moral dilemmas in doing so. But studying the offerings of our parasha , and symbolically enacting those ancient holy meals in the Temple in our homes can help guide us on our path.

A contemporary Indian food writer and activist, Vадnana Shiva, speaks eloquently about the sacred offering of food as the basis of life and Creation in Hindu tradition:

"The very possibility of our being alive is based on the lives of all kinds of beings that have gone before us -- our parents, the soil, the earthworm -- and that is why the giving of food in Indian thought has been treated as everyday sacrifice that we have to perform. It's a ritual embodied in every meal, reflecting the recognition that giving is the condition of our very being. We do not give as an extra, we give because of our interdependence with all life.

...We are born and live in debt to all Creation and it becomes our duty to recognize this. The gift of food is merely a recognition of the need for constantly paying back that obligation, that responsibility. It is merely a matter of accepting and endeavoring to repay our debts to Creation, and to the communities of which we are part. And that is why most cultures that have seen ecology as a sacred trust have always spoken of responsibility. Rights have flowed out of responsibility: once I ensure that everyone in my sphere of influence is fed, someone in that sphere is also ensuring that I am fed" ("The Gift of Food," Resurgence Magazine,2004 <http://www.countercurrents.org/en-shiva110105.htm>).

And finally another great American food writer, a devout Christian, Wendell Berry, puts it this way in his essay, "The Pleasures of Eating" (1989):

"A significant part of the pleasure of eating is one's accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes... I mentioned earlier the politics, aesthetics, and ethics of food. But to speak of the pleasure of eating is to go beyond these categories. Eating with the fullest pleasure -- pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance -- is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend".

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