

Food and Memory
A Drash by Frank Kurtz
February 13, 2020

Parshat B'Ha-alotkha is named for the procedure of mounting lamps on the menorah in the tabernacle, one of a few final preparations for its consecration. Its context comes from last week's reading, consisting of the final report of the fundraising committee on all the sacrificial animals, grain, silver bowls, and other items, specified by tribe and then totaled up: 2,400 shekels of silver, 120 shekels of gold, and 252 animals either burned up or consumed as part of the ceremony. It's almost time to get things rolling in the tabernacle once the Levites are purified through another series of ceremonies and sacrifices and some workplace rules, which set them apart from the rest of the Israelites into a special hereditary category working exclusively for the Kohanim as professional clergy. All of this is just in time for the anniversary of the Pesach sacrifice at twilight of the fourteenth day of the first month, except for those whose ritual impurity exempted them -- they were given a one-month reprieve to become purified and consume their sacrifice along with unleavened bread and bitter herb.

Time to get moving. There is a divine GPS in the fire cloud that settles over the Tabernacle that tells the Israelites when to get on the road and where to camp after touring around the Sinai desert. However, they did not go about the desert as an amorphous mass. Moses had them form into troops commanded by appointed leaders. Everything and everybody seems to be well regimented for the first foray that lasts 3 days, with Moses singing out what we repeat every week when we take the Sefer Torah out of the Aron:

Kuma Adonai, v'yafutsu oyvecha, v'yanusu m'saneicha mipaneicha

Advance, Adonai, may your enemies be scattered, and may your foes flee before you.

All this preparation and pageantry gets upended when an uproar arises with the most famous kvetch in all of Torah. It was a full-fledged food revolt. The people were crying for meat, for free fish (apparently one could reach into the Nile and pull out dinner, no problem), for cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. The manna from heaven was no longer sufficient for more than preventing starvation. The people were crying for the food in Egypt and wishing they were back; never mind the slavery, the bricks without straw, the taskmasters with their whips, just as long as they could have a real meal now and then. From their description, one might think that Egypt was like a buffet line in a Las Vegas casino.

The rabbis claim that the people could make the manna taste like anything they wanted, making it some kind of ideal super-food. I'm not buying it. It was the same thing, day in and day

out, and it tasted like itself, which led to severe food boredom. Egypt may have been less bountiful than how it was rhapsodized in the kvetch, but it was a powerful memory that induced the people to carry on with profound hysteria. The point was that there were different things to eat, each good on its own, and potentially better in various combinations. A diet consisting only of manna (no matter how plentiful) or only of the avalanche of quail that G-d provides at the end of Chapter 11 does not solve the problem, which G-d deals with by sending makah rabah m'od, a "very severe plague". So much for complaints about the cuisine.

Two realities present themselves in reflection on this episode: first, that food is connected powerfully with memory, both conscious and unconscious, and this pervades our experience, potentially on a daily basis; second, the anticipation and consumption of food, especially in a family situation, through sourcing and preparation of our own devising and in keeping with food traditions, are essential in defining who we are and how we live our lives.

Everyone can remember specific meals in terms of pleasure and other emotions. If asked about the best meal I ever had, my response is instantaneous. It happened in 1978 when Linda and I were on a tour of the Sinai. We spent the night at St. Catherine's Monastery, where we got up at 3:00 AM to climb Mt. Sinai in time to see the sunrise from the top. After we came down we rode a bus for a long hot bumpy ride to the coast of the Gulf of Aqaba, where we came to a small beachside place. We sat at picnic tables under a thatched roof and ate fish caught right there, freshly baked bread, and chilled white wine. They kept bringing us trays of food and bottles of wine until we couldn't eat and drink any more. It was a taste of paradise. I realize now that if I were to taste the same food today in a more objective manner, it probably would not measure up to what I remember. It is as much the memory of the food as the food itself that makes that experience so special.

Similarly, family meals using new and old recipes are the building blocks of life played out around the table. In an agrarian culture such as the era of the story in today's parsha, a family would have brought food from its own field and flock to make a meal. We derive a similar satisfaction of nourishing ourselves and those we love from the proceeds of our work, albeit more indirectly. Just as the Israelites grew acutely bored with the same manna every day, we would be similarly disenchanting if our only access to food was under the control and choice of someone else.

The cliché of Jewish holidays is "They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat." Does this mean there is something unique and possibly neurotic about the relationship between Jews and food? I don't think so. Rather, Jewish practice incorporates all of our senses and experiences

in teaching and reinforcing what our tradition means. A taste of sweetness to begin a new year, a taste of bitterness to recall the slavery of Egypt, a weekly taste of pleasure to differentiate Shabbat from the other days of the week. According to halacha, these tastes are not optional, we cannot decide to deprive ourselves unnecessarily. Wherever Jews have lived through our long history, we have distinguished ourselves by developing extraordinary food traditions and cuisines that have reflected the environments in which they were situated refracted through the laws of kashrut and the observances of holy days and festivals. Families pass these traditions through generations, and this is an essential component of what it means to be Jewish.

In our own time and place we have seen the rise of a corporate food culture based on the technology of a food manufacturing industry. This industry has convinced us that we no longer have time in our lives to prepare meals from basic ingredients. Instead we must purchase and consume packaged food products that require only the most minimal preparation, or else we must rely on a franchisee of a multi-national corporation to supply a meal based on formulaic concepts intended to entice us with unhealthy levels of fat, sugar, and salt. Periodic forays to restaurants may also involve meals overloaded with unhealthy ingredients because we have been convinced that we deserve to reward ourselves from the stresses of everyday life by overeating unhealthy food. The resulting impact on ourselves and on our country speaks for itself.

As one who believes that time and enterprise in the kitchen is fundamental to quality of life, I was happy to learn about a new book by Michael Pollan (author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*) called "Cooked", which resonates to the theme of our food problem. Here are some quotes from his introductory material:

In the course of his journey, he discovers that the cook occupies a special place in the world, standing squarely between nature and culture. Both realms are transformed by cooking, and so, in the process, is the cook. Each section of the book tracks Pollan's effort to master a single classic recipe using one of the four elements. A North Carolina barbecue pit master tutors him in the primal magic of fire; a Chez Panisse-trained cook schools him in the art of braising; a celebrated baker teaches him how air transforms grain and water into a fragrant loaf of bread; and finally, several mad-genius "fermentos" (a tribe that includes brewers, cheese makers, and all kinds of picklers) reveal how fungi and bacteria can perform the most amazing alchemies of all. The reader learns alongside Pollan, but the lessons move beyond the practical to become an investigation of how cooking involves us in a web of social and ecological relationships: with plants and animals, the soil, farmers, our history and culture, and,

of course, the people our cooking nourishes and delights. Cooking, above all, connects us.

The effects of not cooking are similarly far reaching. Relying upon corporations to process our food means we consume large quantities of fat, sugar, and salt; disrupt an essential link to the natural world; and weaken our relationships with family and friends. In fact, the book argues, taking back control of cooking may be the single most important step anyone can take to help make the American food system healthier and more sustainable. Reclaiming cooking as an act of enjoyment and self-reliance, learning to perform the magic of these everyday transformations, opens the door to a more nourishing life.

Even the most ordinary dish follows a satisfying arc of transformation, magically becoming something more than the sum of its ordinary parts. And in almost every dish, you can find, besides the culinary ingredients, the ingredients of a story: a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The rise of fast food and the decline in home cooking have also undermined the institution of the shared meal, by encouraging us to eat different things and to eat them on the run and often alone. Survey researchers tell us we're spending more time engaged in "secondary eating," as this more or less constant grazing on packaged foods is now called, and less time engaged in "primary eating"—a rather depressing term for the once-venerable institution known as the meal. The shared meal is no small thing. It is a foundation of family life, the place where our children learn the art of conversation and acquire the habits of civilization: sharing, listening, taking turns, navigating differences, arguing without offending.

Cooking has the power to transform more than plants and animals: It transforms us, too, from mere consumers into producers. Not completely, not all the time, but I have found that even to shift the ratio between these two identities a few degrees toward the side of production yields deep and unexpected satisfactions. For is there any practice less selfish, any labor less alienated, any time less wasted, than preparing something delicious and nourishing for people you love?

The people who were fed up with manna did not really want to become slaves in Egypt again. They just wanted to live lives in which food played its appropriate role as the center of family enterprise and functionality. Our lives as Jews are potentially reinforced every day as we remain religiously mindful of the earth's bounty in feeding and sustaining us and as we follow and create traditions that lead to powerful memories of love and the essential pleasure of being together in small and extended Jewish families. May this and every Shabbat nourish your body and soul with wonderful ingredients of your own choice and artful preparation.