

Ekev 5777

Shabbat shalom.

Reading this week's Torah portion again this year, I was struck by the section, close to the beginning, which talks about our relationship with one of the subjects that is closest to our heart and more than often completely overlooked.

I'm talking about our food.

If you want to look at it, the passage is on pages 1040 and 1041.

Notice the overall structure. Moses begins by mentioning the manna. Then he lists all the delicious qualities of the land, by way of describing, first, its water supply, and then the seven species that make it unique. Moses points out that the land will be abundant in food, that the people will lack nothing. And then comes a familiar commandment:

Ve-achalta, vesa'vata u'verachta et adonai eloheikha...

You shall eat and be satisfied and bless the Lord your God...

And yet. Only two verses later the same construction - *ve-achalta ve-savata* - occurs once again. This time it initiates a process of degradation - when we have eaten and been satisfied, we will build gorgeous houses, live in them, get rich...and get complacent, and forget all about God. At which point, in tune with the rest of the theology of the book of Devarim, destruction will surely follow.

Why is this? Why, on the one hand, is eating and being satisfied a mitzvah, while on the other, it's the starting point of a process which leads to destruction?

I think it's all about how we get to that point of satisfaction. It's not just that 'we are what we eat.' Rather, EVERYTHING is what we eat. Our relationship with food is a microcosm of our relationship with each other, with the world and with God.

And those relationships are in disrepair.

For example. Recent reports show, alarmingly, that Orthodox Jewish communities are beginning to lead the world in pediatric obesity. A recent survey of two Orthodox communities in Chicago concluded that while a third of the adults were overweight, and a quarter obese, over half the children in the community were overweight, with a quarter already obese. The reasons, it was thought, were specific to the Orthodox community: a tradition of huge Shabbos and holiday meals, a busy lifestyle that often precludes taking time to prepare healthy low-fat, low-calorie meals; and, for children in Jewish day schools, a long school day that didn't allow much time for sports or other physical activities.

Or consider the amount of food we waste. Arizona's Bureau of Applied Research Anthropology conducted an eight-year study to see how much of our food ends up in the trash. It turns out that \$75 billion worth of food ends up in landfills every year. If you prefer percentages, we throw away an average 14 per cent of what we purchase. Or if you prefer figures, that's an average of \$600 per family per year.

Or consider the way that our food is produced. We all remember the Rubashkins scandal. But now that the story has retreated into history, how many of us really know where our food comes from? How many of us know any of the people involved in producing it or getting it to us, the conditions in which they live and work? How many of us even know how many people there are in that chain?

And if we widen our focus, we can see that food supplies in the whole world are under threat. Climate change, animal disease, water shortages, depletion of stocks, a rise in population - all of these are part of the vocabulary of 'global food security', a phrase which is predicted to become more and more loaded and relevant to all of us in the years to come. The Jewish community will not be immune from these issues.

So what are the lessons we can take from today's parshah to help us in our relationship to food?

Let me recap: the three main elements are the manna, the resources and the commandment to eat/be satisfied/bless.

To begin: we need to remember the lesson of the manna. This was food which literally fell from the sky. Elsewhere in the Torah we are told that once the people have entered the land of Israel, they will need to go through all of the various steps associated with feeding themselves - growing the food, harvesting it, storing it, preparing it and so forth – and perhaps that generates a different kind of relationship with it. But I think that today we too run the risk of becoming complacent about our food, buying it and eating it on autopilot. It's time once again for us to drop the manna mentality. Our first step is to remember that we are aware.

Second, we should consider the aspect of resources. That paragraph about the seven species in the parashah is lyrical in its description of the deliciousness and abundance of the land. But I wonder if we take abundance for granted.

We don't have to look far for examples. In 2009, Rob Eshman, in the LA Jewish Journal, wrote about the way we tend to complain about what's provided in our 'free' kiddushim. He argued that 'free has created a generation of Jews that doesn't expect to pay for anything Jewish'. But we know, don't we, that nothing comes for free. We know that everything around us, everything inside us, everything we are, is on loan from God.

Our 'free' kiddushim manifest not only food but human generosity. Week after week families from our community share their joy with each other by way of feeding us. On weeks when they don't, we still provide good, tasty, healthy food. Other shuls have cantors – we have a chef! None of that comes for free.

And the question of resources operates in a wider context, also. What's cheap on the supermarket shelf could well turn out to have penalized the producer in order to benefit the consumer. This isn't fair, and our tradition teaches that it isn't right, either. It is our sacred duty to be aware of what we consume.

And finally, the idea that we should bless. At the moment we consume we should do so mindfully, in a way that reminds us of our relationship with what is greater than ourselves. Some of us may call it 'God'. Some may just call it a higher awareness. The name doesn't matter. What's important is that we make the connection. In his book, 'God in Your Body,' Jay Michaelson points out that 'in almost every contemplative tradition, eating is regarded as a sacred act.' And that act begins with blessing.

That pause before you put something in your mouth marks a critical transition - from mindless to mindful eating. The Rabbis of our earliest tradition devoted a whole section of the Mishnah - *Berakhot* - to deciding what we should do in that pause. It's a holy moment - tiny and transient, but holy nonetheless.

So help yourself to something delicious and learn the blessing to make over it. Pause; notice what you are doing. Savor the anticipation. Remember where your food is coming from. And then, eat!

To return to where the Torah began. We can eat mindlessly. If we do, our satisfaction opens the path to destruction. Or we can eat mindfully. And if we do, our satisfaction opens the path to destruction.

The book of Devarim is full of choices. What will you choose today?

B'teiavon - and Shabbat shalom!