

Food, Hunger & Kashrut

Yom Kippur Morning, 2011

This past summer while I was in Gloucester Mass. I was very excited about visiting the newly rebuilt synagogue for the first time. It was a hot day, and on the way to the synagogue I drove through a Dunkin Donuts and got an iced coffee. I was still drinking it when I arrived at the synagogue, parked my car, and entered the pristine building.

A meeting of the fundraising committee, people I had known and respected for years was going on. I enthusiastically greeted them. They greeted me too: "RABBI!" they shouted. "Get that Dunkin Donuts coffee out of here!"

It took me a few minutes to realize what I had done. The Gloucester temple is Conservative, and adheres to a strict standard of kashrut. The fact that my coffee had no treyf in it was irrelevant. I bought it at a shop that also serves bacon and ham, and even if it did not, has no rabbinical kosher supervision. I had treyfed up the new temple!

This morning I am thinking about food. Today is a *yom tzom*, a fast day, the only fast day that many of us Reform Jews try to keep to the best of our ability. Today we bring gifts of food for the Augusta Food Bank which feeds the hungry in our community. Today we may offer donations to Mazon, the Jewish response to hunger, which feeds hungry people in our country, in Israel and, through the American Jewish World Service in places like East Africa where thousands are literally dying of starvation.

Today let us think about the many food related issues that impact our lives as Jews and as Mainers. We live in a society where obesity leads to most of our major health issues, for children as well as adults We live in a state where many children go hungry on weekends when they don't receive free school lunches. We live life at a frantic pace which makes it a challenge to have slow enjoyable home

cooked family meals, and we pay high costs in quality of life and health for this problem.

My HUC classmate Mary Zamore has just edited a book of essays called Sacred Table. In it she and many other of our colleagues challenge us as Reform Jews to rethink the entire concept of kosher from a Reform viewpoint.

In the beginning of Reform Judaism, the dietary rules were just tossed out as “entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state.(1885 Pittsburgh Platform)

Today many Reform Jews have adopted some kind of dietary code based on a combination of traditional, health and ethical considerations. Many of us are vegetarians. Others try to observe what we may refer to as eco kashrut, trying to make sure that the food we eat or buy is grown or raised in a sustainable manner, that if we eat animals they are raised and slaughtered humanely and that agricultural workers involved in production of our food are well paid and well treated. We are aware of the importance of food justice and understand that true kashrut for us is impossible while others go hungry.

Mary Zamore challenges us as a Reform congregation to develop our own commitment to holiness around eating. We already have a certain consensus: our synagogue allows no meat, only grain, vegetables, fish and dairy. This rule means that we do not have to worry about mixing meat and milk, or whether meat which comes into the synagogue is kosher.

We encourage people to bring veggie/dairy dishes from home, and we know that most of our homes are not kosher. Some of the dishes that come into our synagogue may have held ham, lobster or cheeseburgers. That means that our kitchen is not kosher by Orthodox standards—but we don’t have to go by Orthodox standards. Some of us are impatient with kosher types who are upset by the issue of which dishes to use. Yet those who are gluten intolerant know that for some people, even a tiny bit of wheat may cause a great irritation.

In order to develop a Reform kashrut practice, we must ask what is the purpose of kashrut? Many Reform Jews feel, “It’s for health!” However traditional Jews would not accept that answer. Traditional Jews keep kosher because it is a mitzvah, a commandment from God written in the Torah, in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The kosher rules in the Torah give us a long list of forbidden (*tamei*) and allowed (*tahur*) animals.

We are told we may eat animals with a cloven hoof if they chew their cud (eg beef). The pig has a cloven hoof but does not chew its cud. We are told we may eat fish if they have scales and fins; therefore shellfish are not kosher. Exodus tells us not to cook the kid in its mother's milk, and from that the rabbis derived the rule that meat and milk may not be eaten together, and the rabbis classified poultry as meat.

Furthermore, the rabbis determined in the *Shulchan Aruch* that an animal to be eaten must not only be *tahur* but must be slaughtered in a kosher manner. The rules for kosher slaughter may well have been developed with an eye to kindness toward an animal which is to be killed for food.

A terrible scandal in the kosher meat industry uncovered a few years ago by an investigative reporter for the Forward newspaper has broadened the discussion around kosher meat. Nathaniel Popper revealed that the Agriprocessors Kosher slaughterhouse and meat company in Postville Iowa, at the time the largest producer of kosher meat in the US, was using underpaid illegal immigrant labor and maltreating its animals which were processed in a factory slaughterhouse which followed the letter but not the spirit of kosher slaughter. The Forward articles ultimately led to the shutdown of Agriprocessors and the jailing of its CEO. They also inspired the Conservative movement to revive a dormant concept called *Hechsher Tzedek*. This is a stamp of approval for kosher meat which is not only from a kosher animal, but the animal and the workers who raise it and process it have been treated ethically.

What ethical issues should we consider in developing a Reform kashrut? An issue which is important to the Jewish community as a whole is *Klal yisrael*: the unity of the Jewish people. I believe it is important in a state like Maine, with so few Jews, for us to try to make our synagogue a place where most Jews feel comfortable. Many of our members may eat lobster and bacon, but it would be insulting to

serve these items here in the synagogue. By eliminating meat from our synagogue, we remove many of the issues which might offend a more traditional Jew. However it is important that we also be transparent about our kashrut policy. We encourage potluck meals to increase the feeling of community, but that means our dishes are not kosher. We understand that some traditional Jews would only eat piece of fruit here or a cookie from a box with a *hechsher*.

Another important ethical issue for us is the existence of many hungry people, not only around the world but right here in our own community. My classmate Neal Gold, writing in Sacred Table, points out that Leviticus not only gives us the rules for keeping kosher, but also gives us the requirement to leave the corners of the field for the poor. Sharing our food is a Jewish value: how can we claim to be kosher while people around us are hungry ?

Because of our concern for the hungry we have an ongoing collection box for the Augusta Food Bank, in addition to our annual High Holiday food drive. We have donation envelopes for Mazon, the Jewish response to hunger available at the High Holidays and all year round. Mazon supports the Good Shepherd Food Bank in Auburn which delivers food statewide, as well as advocating politically on issues which affect hunger.

Many of our members give generously of both food and money to the Augusta Food Bank and still others perform both professional and volunteer work advocating for fairer distribution of healthy food, for better nutrition for children and families. The Reform movement has in recent years urged synagogues to work on social justice issues such as hunger less through direct service and more through advocacy for public policies which will reach the problem at its roots. But in the meantime both approaches are necessary. At this point in time most of the direct service efforts to feed the hungry in Augusta are under Christian auspices.

Another Jewish value is health. Our bodies are created

*b'tzelem elohim*, in God's image, and we are obligated to- care for them. It may seem a fine distinction to say we don't keep kosher for health reasons primarily

but we do guard our bodies as being in God's image. Some of the distinction is in the intention. Another important practice is that of saying blessings before and after we eat. Hopefully the blessing reminds us of the source of the food, not just God but the earth, the farmers and agricultural workers, and the animal which may have given its life for us.

The new Jewish food movement, especially the group known as Hazon, encourages Jews to grow our own food and raise our own animals, as Karl and Margaret Schatz are doing with their goats and chickens. Some Hazon members have learned not only how to raise goats but how to do their own kosher slaughter. Actually participating in the slaughter of the animal one is to eat adds an awareness of what the animal gave up.

Perhaps the most important aspect of a Reform food ethic is the positive value of Jews eating together to celebrate Shabbat and holidays. I am phrasing this positively, as Jews eating together, as opposed to negatively. One of the traditional purposes of kashrut was to discourage Jews from eating with non Jews, in order to help maintain Jewish distinctiveness. In our day, when often families don't even sit down at a table to eat a meal, sitting with family and friends to bless the food and to eat and talk together is a priceless opportunity.

One of my favorite themes is the idea that in order to host a Shabbat or holiday meal you don't have to be a great cook or housekeeper. If you can clear off the dining room table and invite one or two guests, say a few blessings before the meal and provide a main course and a dessert, you can create important experiences for your children and for yourselves.

Recent studies have shown the value of family meals for all kinds of things. My Gloucester friend Miriam Weinstein wrote a book, The Surprising Value of Family Meals which was then outsold by Jerry Seinfeld's wife Jessica who wrote Deceptively Delicious: Simple Secrets to Get Your Kids Eating Good Food. We Jews

have been handed the Shabbat meal, the Yom Kippur Break the Fast, and the Passover Seder as guaranteed ways to develop social skills, discourage eating disorders, and improve family & community communication. So I would add to the list of values which a Reform food ethic may promote, both *kahal*, community and *mishpacha*, family.

Jordan just read us the words of Isaiah:

Is not the fast I desire/the unlocking of the chains of wickedness/the loosening of exploitation, the freeing of the oppressed/the breaking of the yoke of servitude? /Is it not the sharing of your bread with those who starve/the bringing of the wretched poor into your house/or clothing someone you see who is naked/and not hiding from your kin in need?

On this Yom Kippur let us determine to make our meals gatherings of holiness, to feed the hungry in our community and around the world, to improve our health and that of our neighbors with food choices that are kosher in the values that they represent.

May you have an easy fast, and may you be sealed for a good year!