

Parshat Ekev
The Land of Milk & Yummy
Rabbanit Michal Kohane - Class of 2020

Food and drink are so central in our lives that we hardly give them a second thought. The online source, thesarus.com gives “eat” 50 synonyms! And yet, we tell ourselves, that food is just a tool; something we “have to” do to sustain ourselves here so we can do all these other great things that “really” matter.

The Torah thinks otherwise. Leafing back to Genesis (2:16), we find that the first time the root ה.ו.צ – *letzavot* – to command – appears in the Torah is right near eating:

*And Hashem God commanded the human, saying,
“Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat
(Genesis 2:16).*

וַיִּצַו ה' אֱלֹהִים עַל-הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל
עֵץ-הַגָּן אָכַל תֹּאכַל

A coincidence? Considering that, according to the Torah, our whole relationship with ourselves, each other and the Divine is enveloped in the concept of *commandment*, this juxtaposition should hint at to us of the great importance in the act of eating. Do we eat to live or live to eat? I would like to suggest that the Torah says, it's the latter!

For one, If there is anything that reminds us of our limitations, of how we can “fall” and be just like animals, not at all like God, it's our need to eat, and at times, how we eat (we might be told, “don't eat like an animal!”). And by the way, procreation and sexual desires are there too, and if you dig through a Hebrew dictionary, you might be amazed at the grammatical and ideological proximity of the words used!

We joke that our holidays are a variation on “they tried to kill us, we won, let's eat”, but the truth is that food and Jewish people, run deep, and rightly so.

The midrash tells us about Abraham and Sarah who “made souls” (Genesis 12:5) through food: they taught people about the One God by having them over for a meal and then, invited them to thank whoever gave them that food, so the guests slowly realized Whom it's all coming from.

On the other hand, we have Moses who stayed up on Mt. Sinai with Hashem for 40 days and nights without food and drink (Exodus 34:28). He was like an angel! The sages suggest that while this worked for Moses, this is not good for most of us. In order to be at peace with the Divine, a person should eat and drink and have a relaxed, full heart of wisdom.

Indeed, in many cultures, fasting seems what's more “spiritual”, more “angelic”, being able to manage without food! But our tradition tells us that it's just as much a mitzvah to eat on the day before Yom Kippur as it is to fast on Yom Kippur itself! This means that by celebrating our being fully human, rather than our being angels for a day, we reach our highest form of being and our greatest way to connect with and thank G-d.

Very interestingly, we (and the animals) are *not* the only ones who “eat”. When the sacrifices are discussed in the Tractate *Zvachim* (“Offerings”), the text speaks of the *mizbe’ach* (altar) as the one that “eats” them. The Land of Israel likewise, is described as “eating” (Numbers 13:32). Though the full expression (“eating its inhabitants”) is often viewed negatively, it can also be learned from it that the Land, specifically here the Land of Israel, is not merely dirt, stones and other “inanimate” objects, but that it is an active, living organism, which has the ability to change those who live on it, as we become an integral part of her!

This week’s Torah portion, Ekev, holds within it the instruction we sing in our daily blessing after meal (Deuteronomy 8:10):

When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.

וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
עַל־הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לְךָ:

Here we take another step: Eating is not enough; we should be satisfied and that process is associated with blessings. But eating can also be dangerous. The next verse continues and says “be careful lest you forget your God.... lest you eat and be satisfied”... (8:11)... Wait, confused? Aren’t we supposed to eat and be satisfied?? Yes. Satisfaction is great when it’s connected to the word “bless”. When the eating gets disconnected from its Source and Purpose, it becomes nothing but pain, agony, dissatisfaction and distance from Hashem and the Land; the Land which is known as “The Land of Milk and Honey”... why not give it some other name? perhaps the “Land of the Wise”? the “Land of Rocks and Challenges”?

But the Land too is named after two foods that have a special quality. Rav Ouri Sherki suggests that if we consider honey (from bees) and the original “milk” (from the human mother) we’ll notice that both come from “non-kosher” creatures. Usually we rule that what comes out of a non-kosher animal is likewise not kosher, but this Land has the ability to take things that are otherwise not kosher, and turn them around, making them not only kosher but sweet and yummy. The unique connection between food, the Land and the Jewish people is going to be even more emphasized soon as we enter the *shmita* year (Land sabbatical).

We often wonder, what can we do to make the world better. The Torah suggests, we don’t have to go far; we can start with the next bite we’re about to take.



Now back in Israel where she grew up, Rabbanit Michal Kohane continues to be a teacher of Torah and Talmud in Israel and abroad, while completing her chaplaincy certification. Prior to that, she was a long-time leader and educator in Northern California, serving as rabbi, Federation executive director and more. Most recently she was the Rosh Kehila of the Prospect Heights Shul in Brooklyn. Rabbanit Michal holds a BA in Studies of Israel and Education, an MS in Jewish Studies, an MA in Clinical Psychology, and holds a PsyD in organizational psychology. Rabbanit Michal’s first novel, *Hachug* (“Extracurricular”) was published in Israel by Steimatzky and she writes a weekly Torah blog.