

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Parshat B'shalach — We Are How We Eat

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We Jews are an oral people. The world we believe was created with words. The Talmudic expansion on Torah is called Torah Sh'bel Peh, the Torah by word of mouth. The two ritual pillars of an observant Jewish life are Shabbat, whose pace and meanings are reinforced through three, mandatory meals, and Kashruth, a complex dietary system.

One of the early and most dramatic experiences of the wandering Israelites revolves around food (Exodus 16). Every night, a flakey, fine white substance, called manna, formed like dew on the earth and the next day sustained the Israelites. "It tasted like a cake fried in honey" (16:31). On Friday twice the daily amount fell so that the Israelites would have food on Shabbat when collecting the Manna was forbidden. The point of the manna, according to G-d, was "so that I can test them whether they will I follow My teaching or not" (16:4).

Faith is a necessary part of health, on the level of gastronomy and on other levels.

The less we trust, the more we retain, and those who retain too much become obese and unbalanced. If we constantly worry, "What will I have tomorrow?" then even when we have food, every mouthful will be full of anxiety and doubt. However, if we are prudent with our portion for today, then we'll have enough reserves, physical and emotional to plan for the future.

800 years ago, Maimonides, in an essay entitled "Preserving Youth" wrote, "If one took care of his body as well as he takes care of the animal on which he rides, he could prevent many sicknesses... For one will never find a person who overfeeds his animal... nonetheless this very person can eat excessively with no limit.... People are often attentive to the...stresses on their animals, to assure that they are...free of infirmities. They do not pay the same attention to their own bodies, though." Maimonides, who was also a physician, tried to encourage a sincere dialogue between a person and his physical needs. He taught that one should give one's body a chance to "confirm" that in fact it requires the food or drink the mind thinks that it needs.

When the Talmudic Rabbis wrote of the world to come they often imagined a great banquet. This was not to praise excess, but to teach us that everything we consume and everything we impart forms a pattern of life, part of a rich ecology, a great planetary feast, which, with the proper attitude we can enjoy every day.