

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Shabbat VaYikra — Hold that spice!

Shabbat VaYikra | March 27 - 28, 2009

This Shabbat we begin the Book of Vayikra, Leviticus, whose main concern is ritual and ethical purity. The first Portion in this Book, also called VaYikra, lays out general rules of the animal and grain sacrifices offered in antiquity.

Chapter Two discusses the Mincha, the meal offering, made only of wheat flour, olive oil and frankincense. The Mincha offering could not contain “Kol S’or V’chol D’vash” any yeast or honey (2:11). This prohibition is counter-intuitive, for the chapter also instructs that the offering be “a satisfying aroma to G-d” (2:1) and that it was to be eaten by the priests (2: 3) As regular customers of Connecticut Muffin or Au Bon Pain can attest, what is more satisfying than yeast and honey?

The Sefer HaChinuch, an anonymous 13th Century Biblical commentary focused on moral education, understand this prohibition as follows: “By keeping Chametz (yeast/leaven) which is made in a long interval of time, far removed from the offering, a person will (acquire) the qualities of alertness, lightness and swiftness ... Concerning the rejection of honey, we would say ...thus let him set his heart only on foods that are beneficial to his body and necessary to his sustenance...”

Leaven and honey, then, convey extremes of dullness and indulgence, while what is necessary for health is moderation. This balance is especially difficult in contemporary “advanced” societies when the most delectable pastries, fresh and attractively packaged, are prêt a porter, ready to go in an instant.

How we eat requires an inner discipline. As a good start, try to monitor your “leaven” and “honey”, sluggishness and impulsivity. Be aware of your cravings and make them pass through a mental checkpoint. Do I really need to eat? How much of my “appetite” may be related to anxiety, lack of sleep, frustration or the prior ingestion of a cocktail or two? Do we follow an artificial schedule so that we “sit down to eat” even we are not really hungry. Do we wait until we’re “starving”, also a destructive practice?

Curiously, while forbidden in the individual Mincha offering, yeast and honey were permitted in the communal Mincha offering. As the Sefer HaChinuch writes, a community can “alert one another”. Diets, as any habit, are socially conditioned. The epidemic of obesity in America presents at least as great a threat to our national health as the economic downturn. It is time for us to support each other on all levels — physical, financial, cultural, and spiritual — as we turn from excess to moderation.