



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Tzav

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Tzav - Purim

Decadent Judaism



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Is Judaism a luxury or a commodity? Does the Torah demand that we live extravagantly or minimally? Does the Torah want us to enjoy this world or to remove all spice from life? If life were a feast, would God want it to be an all-out gala celebration, replete with carving stations and exotic sushi bars? Or should the meal of life be a humble offering of simple bread and water?

Part of the answer comes from this week’s Torah reading, which describes a low-cholesterol law prohibiting Jews from consuming certain fats from certain animals.

But what personal message can be learned from this low-fat law?

Perhaps the nuanced description of Achashverosh’s 180-day feast of gluttony and excess, and Chaim Potok’s presence at a Chassidic gathering on Purim 1973, might provide the answer to the fatty questions of life and teach us an invaluable lesson in how to see everything we do and everything we achieve as a means for a luxurious and divinely decadent lifestyle.

This sermon is so invigorating and stimulating, you will probably drop ten pounds while reading. (Results may vary. Do not consume before consulting with a healthcare professional.)

DECADENT JUDAISM

1. No Complaints (Joke)

Solly is a lovely five year old who gives his parents Maurice and Hannah much *nachas*, much joy and pleasure. Their only worry is the fact that he hasn't spoken a word since he was born. But he appears happy and bright, and he always does what he is told, so they live in hope.

One day at dinner, Hannah is overwhelmed with work and totally forgets about the brisket in the oven and the rice on the stove. So the meal leaves something to be desired.

Indeed, as soon as five-year-old Solly puts the first spoonful into his mouth, he spits it out and shouts, "Yuck. Ick. Gross. This brisket is overcooked and as dry as a Bar Mitzvah lesson, and the rice is undercooked and wet like a leaking nose!"

"Solly, *bubeleh*, you spoke," cries Hannah. "You've just said your very first words!"

"Mazal Tov, son," says Maurice.

Hannah and Maurice dance around the room in joy. When they calm down a bit, Maurice says to Solly, "Why has it taken you so long to speak? You've got such a lovely clear voice, and you are quite articulate."

Answers Solly: "To tell you the truth, until dinner this evening, when you served me this horrid brisket and inedible rice, there really wasn't anything to talk about - everything was perfect!"

2. Feast On This

Jews love a good meal, indeed, we have feasts for everything. For example, on Shabbat, it is a mitzvah to eat three meals and tomorrow, on Purim, it will be a mitzvah to have a festive smorgasbord of delectable delights and scrumptious consumables.

As they say, you can sum up any Jewish holiday like this: They tried to kill us. We won. Let's eat.

But Jews don't just eat. As our anecdote about five-year-old Solly shows, Jews demand *quality*. So long that everything was to his liking, Solly was quiet. He had nothing to complain about. The second the food ceased to satisfy him, Solly opened his little mouth and let the world know that he will not tolerate low standards.

This, of course, reminds me of the waiter that approached the group of Jewish mothers as they were finishing up their dinner in a kosher restaurant. He asked: "Ladies, was *anything* okay?"

What's with the Jewish fascination – dare we say, obsession – with food and service? Why are such a sublime and divine people always thinking about the meal they just ate, or the meal they are in middle of eating, or the meal they are about to eat? And sometimes they think about all three at once, comparing the present feast to the feasts of past and future.

And, most importantly, what does the Torah think about all of this? Is Judaism itself a luxury or a commodity? Does the Torah demand that we live extravagantly or minimally? Does our Creator want us to enjoy this world or to remove all spice from life?

If life were a meal, would the Torah dictate that we turn life into an all out gala banquet, with carving stations and sushi bars? Or should the meal of life be a humble offering of simple bread and water?

Does Judaism preach asceticism? And if so, why then the emphasis on feasts, meals and food?

I don't know about you, but this subject is making me hungry. You too? Are you all thinking: *How long is this Rabbi going to speak? I'm starving. I cannot wait for davening to end and get to the Kiddush.*

Don't worry. I promise you that this food for thought will only help to whet your appetite.

Over the next few minutes, if you will indulge me, I'd like to propose a theory that might address this high-caloric issue and help us understand the Torah's take on the luxurious indulgence in food and the material pleasures of life.

3. Forbidden Fat

The Torah contains 613 mitzvahs, covering every aspect of human experience. One big part of that experience is the food we eat. There are many intricate laws in the Torah, which are detailed in the Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law, regarding the Laws of Kashrut. And one of the subcategories is Hilchot Chelev, the Laws of Fat, derived from the following highly interesting, seemingly very artery-conscious law contained in this week's Torah reading:

Speak to the Children of Israel, saying: "You shall not eat any fat of an ox, sheep, or goat. The fat of carrion and the fat of an animal with a fatal disease or injury may be used for any work, but you shall not eat it. For anyone who eats fat of animals from which sacrifices are brought as fire offerings to the Lord, the soul who eats shall be cut off from its people."²

Without getting into too much detail, there are certain fatty parts of certain animals which were offered in the Temple that are prohibited by the Laws of Kashrut to be consumed by man. In Temple times these had to be burned on the altar as an offering to God.

¹ There is extensive discussion which fats are prohibited and from which animals. See Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Maachalot Asurot 7:5. Chinuch 147. Tur Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 64:1-15.

² Leviticus 7:23-25.

Today, although there is no physical Temple and no physical altar, certain fatty sections of certain animals continue to be prohibited.

It is a known fact that the Laws of Kashrut are not necessarily based on human logic. Rather, a Jew adheres to these laws because the Creator of the world and all things herein said this is the only righteous way to consume and elevate another creature.

Though the Laws of Kashrut are not founded on logic but on God's instruction, there are nevertheless many spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and psychological lessons that may be gleaned from specific dietary prohibitions.

If so, is there perhaps an inspiring and relevant message to be learned from the fat of an animal? What could this mean for us today, when we have no Temple and no altar upon which to offer the fat to God? What is the soul of fat?

To answer these questions, I will digress slightly and first talk about Purim.

4. Purim

The joyous holiday of Purim permeates this extended weekend. Thursday was the Fast of Esther, today is Shabbat Zachor, Sunday is Purim, and Monday is Shushan Purim.

There are four mitzvahs unique to the holiday of Purim. Two of them involve food. There is a mitzvah to partake in a festive feast, and there is also a mitzvah to send food packages to others. (Once again our obsession with food bubbles to the surface.)

The other two unique Purim mitzvahs are giving gifts to the poor and reading (or hearing the reading of) the Megillah, the Scroll of Esther, once at night and once during the day.

[You may want to insert here the actual Megillah reading times and other Purim events taking place in your community].

We will now shed light on our fatty subject by focusing on and analyzing a highly descriptive section of the *Megillah* that is seemingly strange in its nuanced detail.

5. A Feast Fit For A King

Right at the outset, the *Megillah* elaborates in vivid detail upon a lavish, over-the-top feast that King Achashverosh threw to celebrate his ascension to the throne.

In the third year of his reign, he made a banquet for all his princes and his servants, the army of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the princes of the provinces before him. When he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the splendor of his excellent majesty, many days, one hundred and eighty days. And when these days were over, the king made for all the people present in Shushan the capital, for both the great and small, a banquet for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's orchard. Spreads of white, fine cotton, and blue, embroidered with cords of linen and purple, on silver rods and marble columns; couches of gold and silver, on a pavement of green, white, shell, and onyx marble. And they gave them to drink in golden vessels, and the vessels differed from one another, and royal wine was plentiful according to the bounty of the king. And the drinking was according to the law – no pressure – for so had the king ordained upon every steward of his house, to do according to every man's wish.³

We know that every word in the Hebrew Bible is weighted (no fat pun intended) and exact. Not one letter is superfluous, and not one letter is missing. If a letter (never mind a few sentences) is there, it is because it is meant to teach us a lesson.

So why this elaborate multi-sentence description of the feast of Achashverosh? It can't just be to tell us that it lasted 180 days and involved all these gluttonous excesses?

6. The Rebbe's Question

I am not the only one to ask this. During a Chassidic gathering – called a *farbrengen* – on the holiday of Purim 1973, the Lubavitcher Rebbe posed the very same question:⁴

Why is important for the *Megillah* to tell us, and for us to read, about every detail of Achashverosh's feast? Seemingly, the only important detail to know is that Achashverosh's "*heart was merry with wine*" and he thus summoned his wife, Queen Vashti, to appear before him. Her refusal sets up Esther's rise to queen and the miraculous events to follow. That could have been said in one sentence. Why do we need seven, eight, nine sentences describing every detail of the feast – *One hundred and eighty days... in the court of the garden of the king's orchard. Spreads of white, fine cotton, and blue, embroidered with cords of linen and purple, on silver rods and marble columns; couches of gold and silver, on a pavement of green, white, shell, and onyx marble...drink in golden vessels, and the vessels differed from one another, and royal wine was plentiful according to the bounty of the king. And the drinking was according to every man's wish?*

7. The Rebbe's Answer

The Rebbe answered as follows. I took the liberty to paraphrase his answer:

The *Megillah* is going into exquisite detail to teach us an invaluable lesson, and that is this: When we do something, we must do it to the best of our individual abilities and capabilities.

Achashverosh was a king over 127 provinces, the leader of the Persian Empire, in his day the most powerful man on earth. A king such as this does not throw a few pieces of herring and *kichel* together and call it a

⁴ Printed in *Sichot Kodesh* 5733 (p. 410ff).

party. Oh no – it is incumbent upon a king of Achashverosh’s stature to use every resource and luxury at his disposal to celebrate his leadership and kingship.

If this is the case with Achashverosh, who was no genius, and who did this of his own accord, how much more so when an individual has a mission from the Creator of the world, God Himself, to do a mitzvah – to refine the world.

Each of us must use all the resources we were blessed with to the fullest. We should not look at someone else and say: Because so-and-so did something in such-and-such way I, too, will only do it in such a minimal way. No! If we have more resources and more potential then we must not be satisfied with making a simple meal, but rather throw a feast in a manner of *in the court of the garden of the king's orchard!*

Achashversoh was not satisfied with a 179-day feast – it had to be 180 days proper! And it wasn’t enough that only his own heart be merry with wine, but that each person in the kingdom was offered *according to every man's wish*.

When God provides us with an opportunity, with a gift, with a certain talent and resource, we must use it to the utmost of our ability.

It is not enough to do it minimally – we have to make *a banquet for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's orchard*. We are doing ourselves and the world an injustice if we do not do live up to our *own* potential.

Our purpose on earth is to turn the barren desert into a promised land. To turn a spiritual famine into a spiritual feast. Achashverosh, as the *Megillah* describes, feasted and partied like a king is meant to. If he did not – if he did less – then that would have been like a prince partying like a pauper. This is why the *Megillah* shares with us the specific details of the party: to inspire us to utilize and actualize all our potential to transform the world into a heavenly party – each of us using our unique trappings.

8. Chaim Potok Example

In the audience, listening to the Rebbe's talk was the famed writer Chaim Potok, author of *The Chosen* and other novels. And so, when the Rebbe gave a few examples of how different professions must prepare the divine feast of life, he not coincidentally spoke about the task of the writer. Again I paraphrase:

Say God gifts someone the talent and opportunity to write a book. Whatever the cover of the book may look like, and whatever the general theme of the book may be, the author needs to use his talents to the fullest in conveying to the reader that "there is a Landlord to this palace,"⁵ that there is a Master over this seemingly wild world.

Perhaps when we look at the world with our naked eyes, it may seem as if this world is a jungle, where the survival-of-the-fittest, dog-eat-dog reality dominates and no one imposes order. But that is not so.

Comes God and grants an individual the ability to write a book, and someone else to publish that book. When that happens, the writer must use his God-given ability to the fullest and recognize the responsibility that his talent presents – by revealing universal truths, by demonstrating that there is a Creative Power in this universe that makes everything tick and everything pulse. No matter what the externals of the book may be, at the end of the day the reader must walk away from the book with a greater knowledge of true reality.

It is not enough to do the minimal ... to produce one book. He must produce many books, translated into different languages, and cannot be satisfied with doing only the minimal. Then and only then is he emulating the *Megillah's* instruction, to create a feast to the best of his potentials and abilities.

The same is true with any profession. Some of us are authors. Some of us are lawyers. Some of us are doctors. Some of us are teachers. Some of us are rabbis. Some of us are secretaries. Some of us are accountants.

⁵ See Midrash Rabba, beg. Lech Lecha.

Some of us are businessmen. Some of us are retired from our conventional vocations. But no matter which field we labor in, the *Megillah's* description of the 180-day feast teaches us that we must use every opportunity, gift, ability and potential to turn this world into a global feast of divine spirituality.

9. Back to Fat

Now we may return to the fat laws contained in our Torah reading and understand what they are coming to teach us.⁶

Our material possessions may be divided into two general categories: (a) the commodities that are necessary for us to exist, such as basic food and shelter, and (b) the luxuries that add flavor and pleasure to the necessities of existence. The former is like the meat of life – nutrients, full of iron, protein and vitamins – and the latter is like the fat of life, adding flavor and delight.

We must differentiate between the necessary commodities/meats of life and its decadent luxuries/fats. We may consume the necessary amount of meat in order to survive, but we may not indulge in the luxurious fat; instead, we must dedicate that to God. Fat is pleasure. Pleasure sweetens the meat of life and makes it tasty. This must be offered to God and may not be eaten. On its own, fat is pretty gross.⁷ Only when dedicated to the Creator of the world does it become pure and holy.

The lesson this offers us is astonishing: The unique skills and resources we each were blessed with leave us two options. If we over-indulge in them they can make us arrogant, fat, and self-absorbed. But, when we dedicate them to their divine purpose, they can be used to turn this mundane earth into a heavenly feast. The difference between the two is selfish consumption of fat vs. selfless dedication of fat. The former is unhealthy and blocks your arteries; the latter is flavorful and delicious.

⁶ See Likkutei Torah, Shir Hashirim 12b.

⁷ See Rambam, Moreh 3:48; Ramban and Abarbanel on Vayikra 3:9.

10. The Lesson

So then, this is the lesson:

We must use our luxury and fat for a higher purpose and can never use it selfishly or even let it go to waste by doing the minimal. When coming close to our purpose and source, we must offer up in a divine fire our fatty animalistic selfishness to God.

But if we eat and consume this fat for our own selfish pleasure, then what happens? Says the Torah: *For anyone who eats fat of animals from which sacrifices are brought as fire offerings to the Lord, the soul who eats shall be cut off from its people.*

A soul, by definition, needs to live a soulful life, with a purpose higher than mere carnal pleasure, hedonism and physical consumption. To achieve this great ideal, the soul comes close to its *raison d'être* by offering the fattiness of life to God.

If instead of dedicating the fats of life to a higher calling, we consume it, then our soul begins to choke and asphyxiate on our selfishness. This is similar to a body being cut off from its oxygen supply, or a fish being pulled out of the water. A soul has to be spiritual, lest it starve.

Judaism teaches this simple thing: Attach divine meaning and soulful purpose to the fats of your life. Every pleasure, every excess, every luxury must not be a selfish endeavor but an offering to God, by which to come close to the Source and to your own higher calling. Use your talents, abilities and gifts by burning them upward in the fire of your soul. Do not do the minimal meal on the run; create a feast fit for a king!

Now we can return to our opening question: Is Judaism a luxury or a commodity? Does the Torah demand that we live extravagantly or minimally? Does the Torah want us to enjoy this world or to remove all spice from life? Is life meant to be a decadent feast or a plain meal on the go?

The answer is: Judaism demands that we bring pleasure – fat and flavor – to the world by not *consuming* the fat but by burning it and sending it up to heaven, by raising the animal bliss up to its Creator.⁸

Now, you tell me whether Judaism demands dryness and flavorlessness or luxury and taste.

11. In Conclusion: Fat Chance

A rather portly gentleman returns home from his annual physical and tells his wife that he's got it all figured out. "Yitta, dear, I have breaking news. My weight issues aren't weight issues at all – they are height issues: After looking at the height/weight chart in the doctor's office, I came to the startling realization that I am simply nine inches too short for my weight!"

Life can be lived in height and also in weight. Height is how high we reach. And weight is how much heft we attach to each one of our actions.

I think the lesson here is clear. We reach the highest places and achieve our highest goal and realize our highest dreams when we apply weight to every single one of our actions.

⁸ As Maimonides writes (Mishne Torah, conclusion of the laws of Issurei Mizbeiach): *"One who desires to gain merit for himself, subjugate his evil inclination, and amplify his generosity should bring his sacrifice from the most desirable and superior type of the item he is bringing. For it is written in the Torah (Genesis 4:4): 'And Abel brought from his chosen flocks and from the superior ones and God turned to Abel and his offering.' The same applies to everything given for the sake of the Almighty who is good. It should be of the most attractive and highest quality. If one builds a house of prayer, it should be more attractive than his own dwelling. If he feeds a hungry person, he should feed him from the best and most tasty foods of his table. If he clothes one who is naked, he should clothe him with his attractive garments. If he consecrates something, he should consecrate the best of his possession. And so (Leviticus 3:16) states: 'All of the superior quality should be given to God.'"*

Everything we have, everything we possess, is a gift given to us by God to bring light and goodness into this world. The more we have, the greater the gift and opportunity. If we see everything this way – no matter what the item may be – then everything takes on a weight and importance. It matters not what another fellow is doing, for we can never compare. We just have to do what we have the ability to do. A king does what he can do. Period.

Then our professions become more than just a means for making money – they become a means for changing the world. Our families become even more precious to us than the people we love – they become our partners in this feast of life.

There are spiritual disciplines and religious systems that preach that physical matter, especially extravagance and luxury, is antithetical to a soulful and divine life. The Torah has a different message. The Torah teaches: “Whatever gifts you have, use it for God; any material fat and pleasure you have, offer it to God.”

Life becomes healthy when we connect ourselves and everything we have – including every luxury – to the Source of all luxury: God Himself. Life becomes majestic when we become channels of divine majesty and abundance.

When instead of selfishly consuming the pleasures of life, we dedicate them to a higher calling, then life truly does become pleasurable and delectable.

Enjoy the feast!

Shabbat Shalom and a Happy, Extravagant Purim!