



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## DEVARIM > Devarim

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August 13, 2016  
Devarim/Shabbat Chazon/  
Tisha B'Av

**How to Make the Bland Tasty**



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

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How to Make the Bland Tasty

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## ABSTRACT

Today, the Ninth of Av, is usually the saddest day in the Jewish calendar, but being Shabbos we honor the day with joy, and the fast and grieving is suspended until tonight and tomorrow.

What happens when life is devoid of flavor? How can we make it taste good?

A providential confluence of a fast day and fast food may provide a clue, as alluded to in this week’s Torah reading.

The Torah deploys many metaphors and methods to teach how to better our lives, including how to find meaning in monotony and how to improve the taste of whatever seems too bland.

Indeed, two spiritual cooking aids are hinted at in two geographical place names – Paran and Tofel – which Moses references in this week’s *Parshat Devarim*.

Paran hints at *pru u’revu*, be fruitful and multiply. Tofel – which is also mentioned in Lamentations, the book we read on *Tisha B’Av* – hints at tastelessness. The remedy seems to be to add salt, as per the Book of Job.

So now let’s see how we can we apply these soulful ingredients to make the dish of our personal lives delicious, and transform our sadness into joy...

## HOW TO MAKE THE BLAND TASTY

### 1. Grace Before Meals (Joke)

Little Yossi and his family were having dinner at his Bubby's house. When everyone was seated, the food was served. As soon as little Yossi got his plate, he started eating right away.

"Yossi, you have to make a blessing before you eat," his father admonished.

"I don't have to," Yossi replied.

"Of course you have to," said his mother. "Don't you always make a blessing before eating at our house?"

"Yes, but that's our house," Yossi explained. "This is Bubby's house and Bubby knows how to cook."

### 2. Well Done (Joke)

Maurice and Sadie are having dinner out at the Bubbeh-Myseh restaurant.

While Maurice is eating his grilled steak and chips, the waiter comes over to him and asks, "Is everything OK, sir?"

"Well," replies Maurice, "I asked for my steak to be rare, and it was well done."

"Thank you sir," says the waiter, "we always aim to please."

### 3. Fast Food President (Optional)

Perhaps because of the limitations on culinary indulgence during these Nine Days, I have been thinking a lot about food. Every time I opened a newspaper this week, there seemed to be a food-related article staring me in the eyes. Like this one about Donald Trump and his love of fast food.<sup>1</sup> Let me read you a short excerpt from it:

President Obama is so disciplined that his wife has teased that he eats precisely seven lightly salted almonds each night. George W. Bush was an exercise buff, obsessed with staying trim by mountain biking and clearing brush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. But Donald J. Trump is taking a different approach: A junk food aficionado, he is hoping to become the nation's fast food president ....

"There's nothing more American and more of-the-people than fast food," said Russ Schriefer, a Republican strategist and ad maker. "It is the peculiarity of the brand that he's able to be on his multimillion-dollar jet ...and eat KFC — and what makes it perfect is he does it all with a knife and fork, while reading *The Wall Street Journal*."

Mr. Trump is a lover of diner fare and fast food grub, of overcooked steaks ... and the bland nourishment of Americana. He prefers burgers and meatloaf, Caesar salads and spaghetti, See's Candies and Diet Coke. He shuns tea, coffee and alcohol ... [and his diet] telegraphs to his blue-collar base that he is one of them.

[Once he even suggested that, if elected president, he'd do away with fancy state dinners. Instead of all that expensive, gourmet food, when meeting with heads of state, he said,] "we should be eating a hamburger at a conference table, and we should be making better [trade] deals..."

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/09/us/politics/donald-trump-diet.html>.

## 4. Fast Food and Fasting

Talking about food – specifically *fast* food – reminds me that, if it weren't for Shabbat, today would be a *fast* day.

Today is *Tisha B'Av*, the ninth day of Hebrew month of Av when we mourn the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians and the Second Temple by the Romans. Normally, we fast on this day. But because today is Shabbat, we celebrate and rejoice, feasting and drinking, wining and dining. And we postpone the mourning – and fasting – until Shabbat is over.

Basically the holiness and pleasure of Shabbat (*oneg Shabbat*) overrides the sadness of *Tisha B'Av*.

So it seems that it is appropriate to speak about food today.

As is often the case in life, the greatest truths are sometimes found in seemingly mundane and unrelated topics. For example: food. Food is a relatively harmless subject from which we may derive many colorful metaphors in order to improve the taste of some hard-to-swallow life lessons.

And in that spirit, this is the question I would like to pose today: What happens when life loses its flavor? What to do when everything seems bland? How to add spice, vim, vigor?

As is always the case, the answer is found in the Torah.

## 5. Parshat Devarim

This week's Torah reading, *Parshat Devarim*, begins:

*These are the words which Moses spoke to all Israel on that side of the Jordan in the desert, in the plain opposite the Red Sea, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan and Hazeroth and Di Zahav.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Megillah 31b.

The Jewish people were on the threshold of the Promised Land, on brink of entering the Land of Israel. At this juncture, 37 days before he would ascend on high, Moses began reviewing all the Torah lessons that he had taught them up to now. These lessons are what comprise the fifth and final book of Torah, Devorim, Deuteronomy.

The fact that the first two geographical locations mentioned are Paran and Tofel tells us a lot. These place names hint at food. Right here, the Torah is teaching us that entering the Promised Land requires both fruitful quantity and tasteful quality, as I shall shortly explain.

But before I delve into the deeper meaning of Paran and Tofel, let me remind you that all the geographical places mentioned in the Torah are also places in our psyche, places that represent the emotional and spiritual journey from Egypt to Israel, from exile to freedom.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that the final book of the Torah opens with these two specific places, Paran and Tofel, is no coincidence. Their names hold two essential keys to unlocking the gates of our personal Promised Land.

## 6. Paran and Tofel

What do Paran and Tofel mean?

The Talmud teaches that etymologically Paran comes from the term, *pru urevu*, meaning “be fruitful and multiply.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Rashi states that in Paran the Jews began producing much offspring.

This term is also found in the Book of Genesis, where Jacob blesses his son Joseph: *Joseph is a fruitful son [ben porat Yosef], like a fruitful vine by the fountain, with branches running over the wall.*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, 42 Journeys of Your Life, a comprehensive psycho-spiritual application of the Israelites’ journeys through the wilderness.

<sup>4</sup> Shabbat 89a-b.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 49:22. This follows the Living Torah translation by Rabbi Arye Kaplan. Rashi translates *porat* as *chen*, or grace/charm. See Living Torah for other interpretations of *porat*, such as “bough” or “branch.”

Incidentally, the Hebrew for Joseph, *Yosef*, means “to add/multiply,” so *ben porat Yosef* means the same as *pru urevu* – be fruitful and multiply.

All of that leads us to conclude that the place name Paran is referring to quantity and production.

Now, Tofel is also found in the Book of Lamentations, in the verse we will read tonight after Shabbat at the onset of the postponed fast of *Tisha B’Av*:

*Your prophets have seen false and senseless [v’tofel] visions for you, and they have not exposed your iniquity to straighten out your backsliding, but have prophesied for you false and misleading oracles.*<sup>6</sup>

Rashi translates *v’tofel* into Old French as *aflestrimant*, meaning “insipid” or “tasteless.”

The tastelessness or blandness of Tofel is further highlighted in the Book of Job, which asks: *Can bland food (tofel) be eaten without salt?*<sup>7</sup>

## 7. Salt

Interesting no? Job seems to be implying that salt is the remedy for bland food.

Indeed, salt was required as part of the sacrificial offerings in the Temple. As states the Book of Leviticus:

*And you shall salt every one of your meal offering sacrifices with salt, and you shall not omit the salt of your G-d’s covenant from your meal offerings. You shall add salt to all your sacrifices.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lamentations 2:14.

<sup>7</sup> Job 6:6.

<sup>8</sup> Leviticus 2:13.

Salt, a product of water<sup>9</sup> – in effect the compressed molecules and distilled minerals of water crystallized – has the power to bring out and accentuate the natural flavors in all foodstuffs.

As the famed chef, Thomas Keller, once said, salt is meant to highlight a food's natural flavor, but it should never be an additional flavor. If you can taste salt, there's too much of it. Unlike pepper, which adds a new flavor profile to a product, salt is meant to highlight that natural product.<sup>10</sup>

Blandness in life could be dressed up with pepper; or we could apply a little salt to accentuate and highlight life's natural flavor and taste.

Now, that said, what does all this have to do with entering the Promised Land?

The first step to success in any endeavor, to entering the physical or spiritual Promised Land, is Paran – we have to be productive and fruitful, to multiply and expand. The second step is Tofel – we have to take the dull and insipid and add salt to the blandness to accentuate the product's natural flavors.

## 8. The Psycho-Spiritual Explanation

The mystics explain Paran and Tofel in a personal, psycho-spiritual manner.<sup>11</sup>

In Kabbalistic spiritual terms, quantity or fruitfulness is *chessed* (loving-kindness), while quality or taste is *gevurah* (discipline). The perfect dish is found in the balance of the two.

*Chessed* is a flow of unfettered energy, abundance, expansion, productivity, multiplication – in short, quantity and fruitfulness.

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<sup>9</sup> See Rashi to Leviticus 2:13.

<sup>10</sup> See introduction to Ad Hoc At Home, how to use salt properly. As well as: <http://www.latimes.com/food/la-fo-harnessing-salts-power-20140624-story.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ohr Hatorah, Numbers vol. 1, p. 14-15.



*Gevurah* is strength, discipline, a concentration and contraction of energy into a distilled focus. This leads to isolating components and highlighting their essence. Where *chessed* stresses quantity, *gevurah* compresses molecules into quality, into focus and taste.

Paran, fruitfulness and multiplication, is rather straightforward. It calls upon us to do as much as we can as often as we can, to be as productive as we can, and let the energy flow indiscriminately.

But, to enter the Promised Land, we need something more. We need flavor, we need taste. We need to pass through Tofel, tasteless insipidness, and we need to season it with salt in order to turn blandness into tasteful flavor.

## 9. Why Do We Fast on Fast Days?

Sometimes it takes a fast to remind us of how much abundance we have, and how much taste exists in life.

Why do we fast on fast days? One reason is to mourn – to starve our bodies to feel the anguish of our souls. Another reason is to express our desire to transcend the material level, like on Yom Kippur. But the ultimate reason is to pause and remind ourselves of our blessings and to appreciate what we have.

Today, on Shabbat, we do not fast. We are prohibited from fasting. Why? Because Shabbat itself reminds us of the abundance and taste that we have.

## 10. Personal Lesson: Be Fruit Full, Be Taste Full

We each have a Promised Land, be it personal, professional, communal, local, or global. To reach our Promised Land, we must first pass through two places:

1) Paran – the place of fruitfulness, abundance, productivity, of flowing energy, and

2) Tofel – the place of tasteless blandness seasoned with salt and turned into a tasty delight

Two keys to life: abundance and taste. Abundant food that is bland is not optimal; tasty food that is scarce is not ideal; but abundant delicious food, abundantly tasteful and tastefully abundant is the pinnacle.

Ask yourself what in your life requires more abundance and quantity.

Ask yourself what in your life requires more taste and quality.

In the areas of your life where you need more abundance, find ways to create flow. This could be through inspiring others, teaching, influencing – activities that bear fruit and multiply.

In the areas of your life where you need more taste, find ways to create focus. Spend more quality time with your spouse and your children. Concentrate more on something you are studying or a hobby you enjoy.

Flow and focus – Paran and Tofel – are the two keys to a successful life.

## 11. Law Breaker (Joke)

Moshe goes to see his rabbi. “Rabbi, last week I missed saying grace after meals.”

“Why,” asks the rabbi.

“Because I forgot to wash my hands before the meal.”

“That’s twice you’ve broken the law but you still haven’t told me why.”

“The food wasn’t kosher.”

“You ate non-kosher food?” asks the rabbi.

“It wasn’t a Jewish restaurant.”

“That makes it even worse,” the rabbi is now angry. “Couldn’t you have eaten in a kosher one?”

“What, on Tisha B’Av?”

## 12. Suggestive Comments (Joke)

Rachel had not seen her Israeli relatives for years, so she was very excited when her Aunt Leah and Uncle Yitzhak came to visit her in London. To celebrate their visit, Rachel took them to an old-fashioned kosher restaurant in Hendon.

“I’ll have the *kreplach*,” Rachel told the waiter.

“The *kreplach* is from last night,” offered the waiter. “Better you should order something made fresh today. How about stuffed peppers?”

“Okay, let it be stuffed peppers.”

The waiter turns to Aunt Leah.

“And you?”

“Bring please the pot roast.”

“Look, lady, the pot roast is strictly for goyim. If you want something special, try the *flanken*.”

“All right then, so bring the *flanken*.”

Uncle Yitzhak studied the menu carefully then said to the waiter, “I can’t make up my mind. What do you suggest?”

“Suggest!” cried the waiter. “On a busy night like this who has time for suggestions?”

### 13. Delicious Dessert (Conclusion)

Perhaps there is no time for suggestions in busy fine-dining establishments. In synagogue, however, righteous suggestions that help better our lives are the order of the day. Therefore, I would like to conclude with this suggestion, which is also a blessing and prayer:

I pray and bless and suggest that all of us here in this room – and, by extension all peoples of the world – do everything in our power to season life's ingredients in such a way that the bland becomes tasty and the flavorless becomes delicious. At the same time, I pray and humbly suggest that G-d do everything in G-d's infinite divine power to help us in our endeavor.

If we do our part in adding salt to life's blandness, surely never again will we mourn a destruction, but forever only celebrate the construction of the third and eternal Temple speedily in our days, now, before Shabbat ends, and then celebrate Tisha B'Av as the greatest of all holidays. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!