



DEVARIM

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Why Do We Crave Food?
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WHY DO WE CRAVE FOOD?

NOT BY BREAD ALONE: THE REAL STORY BEHIND EATING

ABSTRACT

Why are we obsessed with food? Take the latest in nouvelle cuisine out of France called vin-bo-vin: such tasty beef that it is going for \$122 dollars per kilogram! (You'll be surprised to know the reason and the meaning behind the strange name of this beef and why it is flying off the shelves).

Our food passion is really bizarre: How much time transpires between the moment that you put a piece of food in your mouth and when it turns into mush? Maybe five or ten seconds! And yet, how much time and energy and how many trillions of dollars are spent on the food industry to gratify these short seconds?

This question is amplified when it comes to Jews, who make such a fuss about food: Hamantashen and kreplach on Purim. Latkes on Chanukah. Cheese blintzes on Shavuot. Honey and apples on Rosh Hashana. Even Yom Kippur – the holiest day of the year – is about food: It's a fast day – we are fixated on not eating food. And on the day before Yom Kippur we are told to eat twice as much! Then there is of course Passover, with its unique menu, and each family preparing their own special recipes. It seems that for every holiday there is another food... What's this Jewish obsession with food and gastronomy? What is so spiritual about a sumptuous meal?

This sermon looks at the deeper meaning of the message within this week's Torah reading: "Not by bread alone does man live, but by all that comes out of the mouth of G-d..." and addresses a most basic but far reaching question: Could there be something more to our hunger and thirst than just food deprivation?

Gleaning from our great mystics – including Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, whose 73rd yahrzeit we honor this Shabbos (Av 20) – we learn that eating a simple meal – and even our particular food tastes – is part of our life's mission, and it gives us nothing less than the opportunity to change the world!

1. Vin-Bo-Vin (Humor)

Why are we obsessed with food?

Take this interesting piece of news (from a while ago):

The latest delicacy out of France – where else? – is called vin-bo-vin. This is such tasty beef that it is going for \$122 dollars per kilogram.

What exactly is vin-bo-vin?

If you are guessing wine-cured beef you are close, but you are wrong.

Vin-bo-vin is not a tough steak marinated for a long time in red wine to soften it up. Vin-bo-vin is beef from a happy cow. Yes, a *happy cow*. A cow who has spent most of her happy life sipping wine, consuming about two bottles a day.

Now how did the French get the idea of feeding wine to a cow to make her happy? Well, ABC News reported at the time¹ that a French winemaker and a French cattle breeder just happened to be discussing the latest research showing that, if a cow is happy, the meat is more tasty. And it just happened that the cattle breeder had some spare cows strolling around the back pasture.

Voila! An idea was born – let's make those cows happy and make some money.

The breeder and the winemaker calculated that if the average Frenchman drinks two glasses of wine a day, then a cow (being much larger) should properly imbibe two bottles.

Next thing you know, the happy beef is flying off the shelves and prominent chefs are swearing by it. The latest in nouvelle cuisine!

2. The Quest for Delicacies

Now let me ask you: What is this quest for the newest delicacies all about?

Why are we always looking for the most tender beef, the finest wine, the moistest cake, the crustiest bread, the smoothest latte? Why are our taste buds so busy all the time? Why are we not satisfied with some nuts and berries picked off the forest floor?

And that leads me to yet another – and more basic – question: Could there be something more to our hunger and thirst than just food deprivation?

Think about this: How much time transpires between the moment that you put a piece of food in your mouth and when it turns into mush as it begins to make its way down your gullet entering the digestive process? Maybe five to ten seconds!

How much time and energy do we spend to satisfy these five fleeting seconds – the brief moments it takes until all types of food are equalized in our throats? How many trillions of dollars are spent on the food industry to gratify these short seconds?

What is the mystery behind our craving for food?

¹ <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/french-cattle-wine-improve-taste-beef/story?id=16845782>

3. Jews and Food

This question is amplified when it comes to Jews:

Judaism makes such a fuss about food that you have to wonder if that is not the cause that so many Jews today find their tradition to be spiritually irrelevant and morally bankrupt. Hamantashen and kreplach on Purim. Latkes on Chanukah. Cheese blintzes on Shavuot. Honey and apples on Rosh Hashana. Even Yom Kippur – the holiest day of the year – is about food: It's a fast day – we are fixated on not eating food. And on the day before Yom Kippur we are told to eat twice as much! Then there is of course Passover, with its unique menu, and each family preparing their own special recipes.

It seems that for every holiday there is another food...

What's this Jewish obsession with food and gastronomy? What is so spiritual about a sumptuous meal? What is significant and eternal about cuisine, and at that, food that lasts a mere five seconds before it enters our systems?!

4. Great Philosophers' Question

Some of the greatest philosophers throughout history have pondered the question about our food cravings. And a few of them went even deeper, asking: What exactly feeds the soul? From where does the spirit derive its energy?

On the one hand, it doesn't make sense that the soul draws its energy from physical food. On the other hand, the soul cannot survive without food like an angel, because a person will die from hunger ... and death is, by definition, the soul departing from the body.

So the difficulty is this: If the soul is not nourished and sustained by food, why does lack of food cause the soul to depart from the body?

The great philosophers have been totally baffled by this question.

5. The Ari's Answer

Of course, the Jewish mystics know better.

The great 16th century Kabbalist known as the Ari² – Rabbi Issac Luria – explains that these philosophers

2 Likutei Torah and Sefer HaLikkutim on Parshas *Eiker*.

were simply ignorant of what rests at the root of creation – that “the world was created with ten utterances”³ ... and that each detail in creation came into being and is continuously sustained and energized, not by food, but by divine “words.”

In fact, this is exactly what the Torah tells us in this week’s reading: “Not by bread alone does man live, but by all that comes out of the mouth of G-d...”⁴

How does this work?

Well, for example, when G-d said, “the earth shall send forth vegetation ... and fruit trees,” these divine words brought vegetation into existence and continued to serve as the inner energy which perpetually gives life to all vegetables and fruits on earth.

In effect, every part of the physical universe has a divine spark within that gives it life. The physical aspect is merely a shell that encases this spiritual energy which, when manifested on the physical plane, takes on the shape of the respective object.

Thus, when we take any food item and make a blessing, invoking G-d’s name – for example, “Blessed are you G-d ... Who brought this bread out of the earth” – we awaken the divine spark of energy through which the bread was created.⁵ And it is this energy within the bread that becomes the sustenance for the soul.

6. Deeper Meaning

But there is more that this week’s Torah reading communicates. To mine its secrets, let us examine what it says in greater detail:

[G-d] afflicted you and let you go hungry, and then He fed you with manna which neither you nor your ancestors had ever experienced. This was to teach you that not by bread alone does man live, but by all that comes out of the mouth of G-d...⁶

According to the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, when the Jews first received the manna, they did not know how to relate to it. This heavenly food was very ethereal and lacked any physical taste. (Clearly, it was no vin-bo-vin.) In fact, it was so tasteless to them that they actually got disgusted with it.⁷

³ Avos 5:1.

⁴ Deuteronomy 8:3.

⁵ The Baal Shem Tov (cited later) brings as an example for this the Talmudic statement “when one species comes in contact with a similar species it awakens its power” (Eiruvin 9a).

⁶ Deuteronomy 8:3.

⁷ Deuteronomy 8:3.

Therefore, G-d then “fed [them] with manna which neither [they] nor [their] ancestors had ever experienced.” G-d took this very spiritual food – the food of angels⁸ – and gave it a more physical character to satisfy humans. In other words, He made this ethereal spiritual food into a physical delicacy.

The purpose of this new, delicious manna was to let the Jews know that when they entered the Land of Israel, where they would eat plain physical bread, that there was more to living than eating. And to teach this to us, as well.

We should always give priority to our soul’s honor before our body’s honor because “it is not by bread alone” that we live. Indeed, we live “by all that comes forth from the mouth of G-d.” And when we draw forth the divine energy within food through our blessings and intentions, our souls are nourished.

7. Why We Crave Certain Foods

And this brings us to our original question: What is this quest for delicacies all about? Why do we crave certain foods?

According to the Baal Shem Tov,⁹ when a person craves a particular food or drink, it is actually his or her soul desiring the divine energy (or spiritual sparks) within these foods. As it says in the Book of Psalms: “They were hungry and thirsty, [and] their souls languished within them.”¹⁰

Why do we hunger or thirst for food and drink? Because our soul and the divine sparks – which languish within the food and drink – crave each other. And sometimes it takes a delicacy to entice us, for the delicacy is a garment that dresses up the spirituality within, while concealing it at the same time.

And this is why G-d created foods and drinks that we especially crave but other people don’t. Because these particular foods and drinks contain divine sparks which relate in a special way to our particular soul.

Each one of us, in our lifetime, is allocated our share of divine sparks that we must refine and elevate. Every meal – all the food and drink that we consume – is literally part of our allotted divine sparks. These sparks stimulate in our soul a hunger so that we will consume and elevate them. Because these shrouded sparks are an extension of our soul, we crave the foods in which they are imbedded.

8 *Yuma* 75b. See also *Tebillim* 78:25.

9 Kesser Shem Tov 194. 218. Sichas Shabbas Parshas Eikev 5720. Likkutei Sichos volume 1 p. 177. Volume 19 p. 295.

10 *Tebillim* 107:5.

8. Reb Levi Yitzchak – Chof Av

This concept was personified and brought to life in the most personal way by Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson (1878-1944), whose 73rd yahrzeit we honor on this Shabbos, the 20th of Av.

Reb Levi Yitzchak wrote volumes upon volumes of esoteric commentary on the Torah, the Talmud, the Midrash, the Zohar, the Tanya and other works. Sadly, most of this material was lost. But on a happy note, some of it was preserved and published by his son, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe.

In these profound writings one thing stands out above all: Reb Levi Yitzchak saw everything in life through the lens of the soul. Every detail – from Biblical nuances to Talmudic intricacies, from the specific names and places associated with a particular situation, from a simple meal to a seemingly incidental journey, even from the details of his own personal trials and tribulations – Reb Levi Yitzchak saw and analyzed every last detail as a spiritual piece in a large cosmic mosaic.

When writing about his sufferings in prison, under arrest for his tireless efforts to perpetuate Judaism under the tyranny of Stalinist USSR, he saw every aspect of his travails, down to the names of his various prisons and the period of time he sat in each one of them, as the Divine Hand leading his footsteps.

In short, in his every breathing moment Reb Levi Yitzchak seeked out the divine sparks – “the mouth of G-d” – within every experience and teaching. He embodied the verse and teaching in this week’s portion: “that not by bread alone does man live, but by all that comes out of the mouth of G-d.”

Every act, even eating a simple meal – and even our particular food tastes – is part of our life’s mission. The Divine mission emanating from G-d’s “mouth,” allocating to each one of us, our particular divine sparks.

9. A New Outlook

This teaching educates us to look at our lives in a new way.

We often think of our material activities as mere menial necessities, while we consider our spiritual and transcendent experiences as special. Being special, they are reserved for special times and places – like the synagogue during the High Holidays, for example – when we feel spiritually inspired.

But it simply is not so.

Every one of our possessions – including our food, clothing and property – contains divine spiritual sparks that relate to the very root of our soul. These sparks are the vitality that sustains each physical thing, which would not exist without the divine energy within, its reason for being.

Everything that comes our way is a divine indication that these particular sparks relate to our soul. And that we

are meant to elevate these sparks. Proper use of our gifts channels this energy toward a higher purpose – this is how we redeem and elevate these sparks, actualizing their intended purpose and the mission of our soul.

So, even when we are eating a meal, this is part of our life mission, and it gives us the opportunity to change the world!

10. Our Personal Sparks

Biologists might say that we eat because our bodies need fuel to survive. But now we know better. It is because our souls hunger for the spiritual sparks within these foods – sparks that belong to our respective souls. These are our personal sparks which await liberation.

This attitude provides a completely new and fresh way to look at ourselves and our physical activities. Wherever we go, whatever we come in contact with – virtually every place and thing we interact with – contains sparks that belong to us – that are part of our life mission. These sparks are longing for us to release them!

So, next time you are hungry or thirsty, next time you crave a particular food, remember this: Though you may be feeling only a physical hunger or thirst, in truth, this hunger pang is your soul craving the spiritual sparks that belong and were allocated to you to release and elevate!

Next time you place a piece of food in your mouth, or go to a restaurant, or prepare your favorite recipe, or sit down for breakfast, lunch or dinner, or go out for a drink, think about this: There is a potency that you can generate with your every bite! There is an energy you can produce with your every sip!

When you look at your daily activities through this lens, you will never again see your life quite the same way. Why not begin today. Amen.