



BEREISHIT

Toldot

Why are Jews Obsessed with Food?

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WHY ARE JEWS OBSESSED WITH FOOD

ABSTRACT

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about Jewish holidays and traditions? Many people answer: Food! For Shabbos we have fish, soup, kugel, kishke, cholent – you name it. We eat potato latkes on Chanukah, blintzes on Shavuot, apple dipped in honey on Rosh Hashanah, matzah and different family recipes on Passover... Even on Yom Kippur we are obsessed with food which we *don't* eat (and the day before we eat double!). Not to mention all the drinks and l'chaim's we consume during Shabbos and holidays. And coming from our national holiday, some Jews surely have special Thanksgiving treats.

But what is so Divine and spiritual about food and drink?! Is there anything more to our holidays than material consumption?! And if there is, why does food stand out from all other elements? Can we expect our children to be inspired by nothing more than lavish holiday feasts?!

In this week's Torah portion we read one of the most controversial stories of the Torah: How the honest scholar Jacob "steals" his brother's blessings through masquerade and deception... Jacob dresses up in Esau's garments and fools his father to give him the blessings that actually belonged to Esau! How could the Patriarch of the Jews have done such a thing and still emerge as a hero?!

A powerful metaphor from the Baal Shem Tov explains both these questions: The Jewish obsession with food, and Jacob's ploy – which reflects how the soul must engage in subterfuge to gain the cooperation of the physical body, a subterfuge that sometimes requires a masquerade, even apparent lies and deceit.

1. Food Obsession

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about Jewish holidays and traditions? Many people answer: Food! For Shabbos we have fish, soup; kugel, kishke, cholent – you name it. We eat potato latkes on Chanukah, blintzes on Shavuot, apple dipped in honey on Rosh Hashanah, matzah and different family recipes on Passover... Even on Yom Kippur we are obsessed with food which we *don't* eat (and the day before we eat double!). Not to mention all the drinks and l'chaim's we consume during Shabbos and holiday. And coming from our national holiday, some Jews surely have special Thanksgiving treats.

You may have heard the about the Yo-Yo Diet Guide to the Jewish Holidays:

Rosh Hashanah -- Feast

Tzom Gedalia -- Fast

Yom Kippur -- More fasting

Sukkot -- Feast

Hashanah Rabbah -- More feasting

Simchat Torah -- Keep feasting

Month of Heshvan -- No feasts or fasts for a whole month. Get a grip on ourselves.

Chanukah -- Eat potato pancakes

Tenth of Tevet -- Do not eat potato pancakes

Tu B'Shevat -- Feast

Fast of Esther -- Fast

Purim -- Eat pastry

Passover -- Do not eat pastry

Shavuot -- Dairy feast (cheesecake, blintzes etc.)

17th of Tammuz -- Fast (definitely no cheesecake or blintzes)

Tish B'Av -- Very strict fast (don't even think about cheesecake or blintzes.)

Month of Elul -- End of cycle. Enroll in Center for Eating Disorders before the High Holidays arrive again.

But what is so Divine and spiritual about food and drink?! Is there anything more to our holidays than material consumption?! And if there is, why does food stand out from all other elements? Can we expect our children to be inspired by nothing more than lavish holiday feasts?!

2. Sarah, the First Matriarch

Yankel, who was quite obese and always looking for new diet schemes, comes home one day from the doctor absolutely elated. “What are you so happy about?” asks his wife. “Let me tell you. The doctor is an absolute genius. Finally someone gave me a diet that I can follow.” His wife was very intrigued. She asked Yankel, “so what can I make for dinner? What did the doctor proscribe?”

“You can make me a everything. Absolutely everything,” replied Yankel. “Everything?! What kind of diet is that,” asked his wife incredulously. “Simple,” said Yankel. “The doctor told me that I should everything that begins with the letter ‘A’ (or the letter ‘Alef’). So that means you can prepare for me ‘a shtikel kugel,’ ‘a shtikel fleisch,’ ‘a shtikel kishke,’ ‘a shtikel french fries,’ ‘a shtikel cake,’ ‘a shtikel kasha varnishkes,’ ‘a shtikel... everything.’

“Now that’s a diet for you...”

Does anyone here perhaps have an answer to this mystery: Why a disproportionate number of kosher foods begin with the letter “K.” Kugel, kasha, kishke, kneidlach, kreplach, kartofel, kartoshke, kielbasa...

3. A Controversial Story

In this week’s Parsha we read one of the most controversial stories of the Torah¹: How the honest scholar Jacob “steals” his brother’s blessings through masquerade and deception... Jacob dresses up in Esau’s garments and fools his father to give him the blessings that actually belonged to Esau! How could the Patriarch of the Jews have done such a thing and still emerge as a hero?!

A powerful metaphor from the Baal Shem Tov² explains both these questions: The Jewish obsession with food, and Jacob’s ploy – which reflects how the soul must engage in subterfuge to gain the cooperation of the physical body, a subterfuge that sometimes requires a masquerade, even apparent lies and deceit.

4. The Prince in Exile

An aging king wants to make sure that his son, the prince, will be a sensitive leader once he inherits the throne. As the son has been brought up exclusively in the palace with all the royal privileges, the king decides to send him to a far corner of the kingdom for some attitude adjustment. There, he is to dwell as an ordinary citizen among regular people and earn his living alongside them. Thus, he can better learn to understand the needs and problems of his future subjects.

Though the parting is painful, both understand this must be done. Yet, the father fears that the son might get so wrapped up in the demands of ordinary life, he will forget the real purpose of this undertaking. So to remind him, the father sends him a letter several times a year. When he gets the letter, the son wants to rejoice and celebrate, but how can he do so without revealing his identity as the prince and possibly offending his neighbors? So he comes up with a great idea – he announces a big party in the city without stating the reason. The people come, and while they are celebrating and enjoying the party simply because of the delicious free food, he is celebrating because he received a special message from his father about which they know nothing.

This is the story of the soul, explains the Baal Shem Tov. The soul once lived in the spiritual realms in a palace where everything was beautiful but where there were no challenges, anxieties, or temptations. So G-d sent the

¹ Related in Toldos 25:19-34, 27:1-41.

² Cited many times in Toldos Yaakov Yosef: Parshas Bo; Mishpatim; Kedoshim; Behar; Nosso; Shelach; Shoftim; Ki Tovo.

soul down to a physical earth where it is not recognized, and where it must demonstrate what it is capable of accomplishing by bringing light into the world.

Every birth is G-d sending another soul into the physical world, even though He finds it difficult to do it and, of course, the soul doesn't want to go. We are born down here, and we cannot consciously remember where we came from.³ Even if we have a sense of it, we cannot fully remember.

But in order to remind us, every once in a while – during the holidays – G-d sends us a reminder in the form of a spiritual message.

There is only one problem. The soul is trapped inside a body, which is not interested in spiritual messages. How can the soul get the body to cooperate?

So G-d says, “Give the body what it wants – all the good food and drink – and the soul can meanwhile celebrate the spiritual message.”

The key thing is to know that the food and drink are only ways to entice the body, not an end in themselves. The primary meaning of the holiday is its spiritual celebration. The delicacies are there only to have the body cooperate and join in the celebration on its terms.

5. Jacob's Masquerade

This is the Jacob and Esau story.

Jacob and Esau were at perpetual war with each other. Beginning already from pregnancy, they struggled with each other. To the extent, as we read in this week's chapter, that Rebecca implores of G-d to explain to her why her pregnancy is so difficult. G-d tells her that she is carrying “two nations.” These two nations are destined to do battle with each other, but eventually “the elder will serve the younger.”⁴

When they are born, the elder (hairy Esau) becomes a hunter, the younger one (wholesome Jacob) becomes a scholar. One day when Esau returns weary and famished from the hunt, he demands some bean stew that Jacob is cooking. Jacob agrees, but in return asks for the birthright – the entitlement of the first born. Driven by physical need, Esau scoffs, “Here I am about to die [of hunger] – what good is a birthright to me?!”

Time passes, and the blind and aging Isaac decides to bless his firstborn son before he dies. (Isaac does not know, of course, that Esau has sold his birthright for a pot of beans.) He asks Esau to go out and catch some game and prepare for him a special dish, and then he will bless him. Rebecca overhears and moves into action.

As soon as Esau is gone, she wraps Jacob's arms in furs so he will feel hairy like Esau to his blind father, and

³ Talmud, *Niddah* 30b.

⁴ Toldos 25:21-23.

she cooks up a tasty recipe for Jacob to serve up.

Isaac, thinking that Esau is standing before him, blesses Jacob with the blessing intended for Esau. When Esau returns he rages that his blessing was stolen and vows to kill his brother, who then flees for his life.

A bizarre story! How can a birthright be sold? A firstborn is a biological fact – first born, the order of birth cannot be reversed after the fact. How can a blessing be stolen? If Isaac intended to bless Esau, what difference would it make if he mistakenly blessed Jacob? He could have just re-stated the words of the blessing anew. And what’s with all the food? The stew, the game dish, the tasty recipe?

6. Two Archetypes

Jacob and Esau – “two nations” clashing with each other – represent two archetypes, two forces in existence and within each one of us: Jacob the wholesome scholar is the soul, and Esau the warrior is the body.

This conflict between soul and body – between spirit and matter – is the purpose for which the soul descends to Earth and enter into a body: In order to tame and refine the physical body and its material interests and transform it into a vehicle for the soul’s expression.

However, the body initially is not cooperative. It has its own selfish warrior-like agenda, and is not interested in the soul or its mission.

The only way the soul can entice the body to cooperate with the soul’s mission is to feed it and satisfy its bodily needs. Hence, the stew and the tasty dishes Jacob (soul) offers Esau (body).

Winston Churchill once famously said: “In time of war, when truth is so precious, it must be attended by a bodyguard of lies.”

7. The Need for Subterfuge

Rebecca, the sensitive mother, understood what was going on. When she dressed Jacob (the scholar) in the garments of Esau (the warrior), she knew it was a masquerade to entice the material universe, like the king’s son enticing the townspeople with free food, to join in the spiritual celebration.

When we teach our children we “bribe” them with sweets and treats. Children study to win the prize. This subterfuge is normal and necessary. But aren’t we teaching them to deceive and manipulate? Of course not.

Children in their limited minds cannot appreciate that learning is something good in and of itself. Because of their narrower perception, we teach them something is good by creating a positive association. It’s like a

metaphor – would we say that a metaphor is a lie? If a teacher can't explain an abstract concept to a student, he or she uses a metaphor that the student can relate to. With time, the student will come to understand the more abstract concept.

The only problem is that some of us get distracted and we stay with the metaphor – the material, the treat, the sweet – and never move to the abstract, spiritual concept.

If you want to teach the world about G-d, you have to live in the world, engage and interact with the world, and speak the language of the world. The key thing is not to compromise the integrity of the original. The challenge is to enter the world and elevate the world without becoming consumed by it.

8. Soul and Body

The lesson in this is twofold:

First you have to always remember, no matter how challenging life may be, even when you get distracted and may forget where you come from, you are a prince sent to this foreign land on a mission. We must always remain focused and know that despite the fact that material survival occupies 95 percent of our time – we are essentially spiritual beings, sent on a mission to earth to elevate and sublimate the physical world.

To think of yourself this way is highly empowering. You have the power to release your soul and illuminate and warm a cold and dark universe. This is your ultimate mission as a human being, the highest purpose of your life.

But that is not enough. We are charged not only to release our soul but also to entice our body to come along for the ride. We do that by “dressing up” in the garments of the physical universe. We – our souls – go “undercover” behind “enemy lines,” camouflaging ourselves to fit in to the material world. We feed and nourish our body with delicacies and delights, motivating it to join us in the celebration – while never forgetting that this is only a disguise. It is a way we have of training our body to join our soul embracing its divine mission.

However, we must always take great care and never forget that we are dressed in a mask. Tragically, many of us often lose sight of the objective and forget. We convince ourselves that the camouflage is our true identity...

9. Endless Opportunities

When you think about it, this insight is absolutely remarkable.

You always remain a prince, even in exile. Every single one of our interactions in this material world offers us the opportunity to discover our spiritual mission. We may think that we are involved in a particular activity for our own reasons, when in truth you were placed – and led – into this situation in order to uncover hidden soul energy.

Moreover – and this is even more fascinating: You are charged with using your ingenuity to find ways that your “physical” interaction is enticed to cooperate with your spiritual mission!

10. The Charade

Yes indeed, every soul on earth is a prince masked in warrior garments of the body and living in a charade among foreigners and aliens. It is our sacred mission to develop methods that “dress up” the soul’s intentions in bodily garments, to entice the body on its own terms to celebrate the Divine message sent by G-d.

After so many years of masquerading – the time has come for the veil to be lifted and the charade to end – with the prince’s soul and body joining as one to dance and sing in having fulfilled the King’s mission.

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