

Understanding Jewish Food Ethics

Table as Altar- what we eat reflects how we serve God.

When the Temple stood, the altar (holy place) lifted up humanity. Now that the Temple does not exist, our table becomes our altar."

Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 97a

"Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish both explained: 'At the time that the Temple stood, the altar made atonement for a person; now a person's table make atonement for them.'"

Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 27a

Welcoming Guests and Feeding the Poor – the importance of sharing food with others, friend and stranger.

"How does one acquire a friend? By eating together, reading together, studying together, sleeping together and revealing one's secrets: both Torah secrets and everyday secrets."

Avot d'Rabbi Natan 8:

"God said to Israel. 'My children whenever you give substance to the poor, I impute it to you as though you gave sustenance to Me.'"

Mekhilta on Numbers 28:2

Giving Thanks – Blessings and thankfulness as central to Jewish food

"Anyone who enjoys of the natural world without a blessing, it is as if he has enjoyed from that which is sanctified for heaven. As it is written in Psalms: "THE EARTH IS THE ETERNAL'S AND THE RICHNESS OF IT" (Psalm 24).

Babylonian Talmud, Brakhot 35a

"We say 'Bless be You, Eternal our God, ruler of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the Earth.' Correctly speaking it would be more correct to give credit to the former, the merchant, the baker? Rather we bless God who makes possible both nature and civilization"

Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man

Pikuach Nefesh – using food to live a healthy life

"When one eats and drinks, one should not be doing so just for the benefit of the sweetness and for the joy of it, but one should eat and drink just for the sake of ones' body and limbs. Therefore one should eat only what the body will use, whether it bitter or sweet, and one should not eat those things which are bad for the body, even if they are sweet."

Maimonides, Midrash Torah, Hilkhhot De'ot

"God created food and water; we must use them in staving off hunger and thirst. God created drugs and compounds and gave us the intelligence necessary to discover their medicinal properties; we must use them in warding off illness and disease."

Maimonides

Social and Environmental Responsibility – our food choices must reflect our general values

“And God put Adam in the Garden of Eden to work it and guard it.”

Genesis 2:15

"One is forbidden from gaining a livelihood at the expense of another's health."

Rabbi Isaac Sheshet

“The Rabbis said: Even though you may think superfluous in the world things such as fleas, gnats, and flies, even they are included in the creation of the world. The Holy One has a purpose for everything including the snakes, scorpion, gnats, and frogs.”

Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 10:7

Think Globally Eat Locally

“A person with a vegetable garden and fertilizes it and hoes it and sustains himself from it is better off than a person who rents as a sharecropper. As the proverb says: ‘Who rents one patch eats birds; who rents many patches – birds eat him.’”

Vayikra Rabbah 3:1 (Midrash on Leviticus)

“He who buys grain in the market to what may he be compared? To a baby whose mother has died, and although the child is taken to homes of wet nurses, the child is never satisfied. And he who buys bread in the market, to what is he compared? To a man who digs his own grave. But he who eats of his own produce is like a child reared at his mother’s breast.”

Avot d’ Rabbi Nathan Chapter 31:1

Discussion:

You should have been assigned one or two topics to focus on. If not, please choose one and answer the questions below.

1. What makes the most sense in the texts you read?
2. What ideas seem weird, wrong or backwards?
3. What is the moral or message that these texts teach us?
4. Is this message this applicable today? How can you apply this teaching in your daily life?

Presentation:

Now as a group, develop a 30 second public service announcement (presentation) explaining to the other students how to follow these Jewish values.

Make sure to include:

1. The moral or message you believe these texts teach us (See 3 above)
2. One of the texts you read
3. How you can apply this value in your daily life (See 4 above)