



We are How We Eat: A Jewish Approach to Food and Sustainability By Rabbi Yonatan Neril and Rabbi Yedidya (Julian) Sinclair

The beginning of the Torah makes clear the centrality of eating to human existence: “And the Lord God commanded man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat. But of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat of it, for on the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17).

Adam and Eve transgressed this command with the first sin – eating from the Tree. Rabbi Tsadok HaKohen teaches that the Tree of Life represents holy eating, while the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil represents eating suffused with physical pleasure.¹ Based on this, Sarah Yehudit Schneider, a contemporary teacher of Torah in Jerusalem, writes that

humanity's first sin was not Adam and Eve's eating of forbidden fruit, but rather the way they ate it. The Tree of Knowledge... was not a tree or a food or a thing at all. Rather it was a way of eating. Whenever a person grabs self-conscious pleasure from the world, he falls, at that moment, from God consciousness....Whenever we eat without proper kavanna (intention) we repeat this original sin. The primary fixing of human civilization is to learn to eat in holiness.

A Jewish Approach to Eating

In a pivotal moment in the book of Genesis, Esau returns tired from the field and encounters Jacob, who has prepared a red lentil stew. Esau says to him, “Pour me (*haliteni*) some of that red red stuff,”² and agrees to sell his birthright in exchange for the stew. Esau’s consumption represents a paradigmatic case in the Torah of a human being eating in an unrefined, base way. The Midrash³ links Esau to a camel through the word '*haliteni*'—a word used to describe pouring food into a camel's belly so it will walk on a long journey without needing to stop to eat.⁴ Based on this, Rabbi Samphson Rafael Hirsch (19th century Germany) explains '*haliteini*' as to “greedily to gulp down.” Esau’s animalistic eating without thought therefore serves as an example of an inappropriate and unholy way to eat.⁵

Eating food is a significant part of the Jewish spiritual path, and Jewish teachings and practices provide guidance for how to eat in a holy manner. These include being selective and mindful of which foods we eat (based on the kosher laws), and how we eat them. In Rabbi Tzadok Hacohen’s “A Treatise on Eating,” he cites the mystical book of the Zohar, which calls the moment of eating “the time of combat.”⁶ This is because in eating a Jew must engage in the spiritual fight to ensure the act is a holy one.⁷

¹ Pri Tzadik, Rabbi Zadok HaKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (Kreisburg, 1823 - Lublin, Poland, 1900), Torah portion of Genesis, section 8

² Genesis 25:29.

³ Part of the Oral tradition explaining the Written Torah

⁴ Midrash Genesis Raba (Vilna edition), 63:12, citing Mishna, Tractate Shabbat 24:3. Rashi cites this Midrash in his commentary to Genesis 25:29. This teaching also appears in Genesis Raba chapter 21, Midrash Tanchuma, Pinechas 13, and elsewhere

⁵ It also was done at significant cost, since it involved the sale of the birthright.

⁶ Cited in Rav Tzadok Hacohen, Kitzur Kuntras Eit HaOchel, section 9

⁷ In a similar vein, Rabbi Natan Sternhartz of Breslov teaches that the main spiritual exertion with relevance to the outside world concerns eating, which is the hardest act of spiritual separation (*berur*) to engage in. He cites the Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Shekalim 5a. His teaching is found in Likutei Halakhot, Betziat HaPat 5.7

If Esau teaches how not to eat, what wisdom does our tradition offer for how we can consume in holiness? We will briefly explore four ideas suggested by Jewish teachings.

Why am I eating? Rebbe Nachman of Breslov identifies the desire for food and drink as the central desire of the human being, and the one from which other desires emanate.⁸ Rabbi Shlomo Volbe teaches that a person needs to distinguish between eating because of a healthy desire of the body (i.e., eating in order to be healthy), versus eating out of base physical desire.⁹ Of course we also know that many people today also eat out of emotional desire. It is therefore important to clarify, before eating, that what I am eating is for the right reason.¹⁰ To eat in a Jewish way, we should eat when we are hungry, to fulfill our body's needs, rather than out of physical or emotional cravings.

How fast do I eat my food? While it is possible to eat a meal in a few minutes, Jewish teaching cautions against doing so.¹¹ Rabbi Natan of Breslov states: "Be careful not to swallow your food in a hurry. Eat at a moderate pace, calmly and with the same table manners that you would show if an important guest were present. You should always eat in this manner, even when you are alone."¹² Along with the physicality of his cravings, Esau's fast eating is also considered unholy. A Jewish way of eating includes eating food slowly and consciously.

Where do I eat? In the Talmud, Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish teach that a person's table has taken the place of the Temple of ancient times in atoning for that person. One understanding of their statement is that when a person eats in holiness at their own table, they have made proper use of their table in a way parallel to the altar of the Temple.¹³ This underscores the significance in Jewish thought of eating at a table, and not while standing or walking. Today some of our eating takes place at a desk or even in a car! We will eat more healthfully if we take wholesome meals at a table.

With whom do I eat? In Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) we learn that Rabbi Shimon would say: "Three who eat at one table and do not speak words of Torah, it is as if they have eaten of sacrifices of the dead...But three who eat at one table and speak words of Torah, it is as if they have eaten at G-d's table..."¹⁴ The act of eating with others and sharing not only food, but also Jewish wisdom, bestows upon the meal an aura of sanctity, and elevates eating to a holy act.¹⁵ A shared opportunity for blessing before and after one eats also serves to connect the act of eating to a higher purpose.¹⁶ These practices elevate our bodily needs and can help transform our eating to become an act of holiness and devotion.

⁸ Likutei Moharan I, 62:5

⁹ Alei Shor, page n/a.

¹⁰ Rabbi Moshe Rafael Seror (contemporary, Israel) suggests a practice for when we feel a desire to eat. We can ask ourselves whether the desire to eat that we feel is for a specific food that we like, for example chocolate, and whether the feeling of hunger extends to foods we don't like. If we can feel in our body that the desire is for the latter, then it is genuine hunger coming out of the body's need for nourishment, and not a smokescreen of the inclination that seeks instant gratification by means of sugary, fatty, or salty foods.

¹¹ One creative approach to thinking about food comes from the word for food in Hebrew, ochel, which is spelled aleph, kaf, and lamed. These letters correspond to the first letters of three words: eich (how), cama (how much), and lama (why). That is, a Jew should examine the way they are eating by asking: how am I eating, how much, and why?

¹² Chayey Moharan #515, by Rabbi Natan Sternhartz, translation by R' Avraham Greenbaum. In a similar vein, Rabbi Tzadok Hacohen in section five to his Treatise on the Time of Eating teaches about the importance of moderation to temper the desire to eat, swallow, and finish quickly. He cites the Talmud, Tractate Berachot 2a-b on how a person should prepare themselves before eating.

¹³ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Hagigah p. 27a

¹⁴ Chapter 3, Mishna 4

¹⁵ Similarly, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin writes about "Eating—A Religious Experience," in A Happening Haggadah " He writes, "The Seder can serve as a model to teach us the Jewish philosophy of eating. We permit ourselves to have only a tiny portion of *karpas*. By immediately withdrawing from the food, we learn discipline and restraint. As human beings we must learn the self-control to put the food aside and make the meal a religious experience. By learning to do not what we have the urge to do, but what He commands, we serve God... On [Pesach] we became a people of God whose primary purpose is to serve Him. We do so by subsuming the physical to the spiritual—by turning our meal into a learning experience and a prayer experience. Indeed the learning and prayer come first. It is through *karpas* that this lesson is brought home to the children around the Seder table."

¹⁶ Rabbi Tzadok Hacohen, Pri Tzadik, Treatise on the Time of Eating, section six

Where Our Food Comes From-- A Biblical View

Even with the above practices, eating as a spiritual practice becomes difficult when a person is disconnected from the food he or she eats. Reflecting upon the sin of eating from the Tree, the Ohr Hachaim (Rabbi Chaim ben Moses ibn Attar, 1696-1743 C.E., Morocco) comments that Adam did not know he was eating from the forbidden fruit, and that his sin was in not making an effort to find out where the fruit Eve gave him came from.¹⁷ So, perhaps the most fundamental sin of the first human being was in neglecting to ask about the origin of the food he was given.

How we eat is fundamentally linked to our understanding of where our food comes from. The Torah describes a reality in which every Jewish family owned and farmed its own land in the land of Israel.¹⁸ Following the Israelite conquest of the land of Israel over 3,000 years ago, the land was divided into homesteads which Jews worked as subsistence farmers. These family homesteads were passed down from generation to generation. Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Edels (17th century Poland) wrote, “when the Jewish people were on their land, every man had land.”¹⁹ This reality had great benefit, as the Psalmist wrote, “When you eat the toil of your hands you are fortunate and it is good for you.”²⁰

At the end of the book of Genesis, Jacob’s blessings highlight characteristics that are unique to each son and to the tribes of their descendants. According to the preeminent commentator Rashi, four of these blessings focus on the agricultural specificity of each tribe’s territory in the Land of Israel.

For example, in Judah’s blessing, “Binding his foal to the vine...he washes his garments in wine.”²¹ Rashi comments that this related to the abundance of wine in Judah’s domain.²² Similarly, interpreting the blessing to Issachar, “He saw a resting place, that it was good, and the land that it was pleasant,”²³ Rashi writes that his land would produce good fruit.²⁴ Issachar, whose tribe’s destiny was immersion in Torah learning, received land where ready-to-eat food grew in abundance and devotion to study would be practical.²⁵ According to Rashi, the tribe of Naftali, which included the Sea of Galilee, was also known for its fruits.²⁶ In the Galilee region, the tribe of Asher was renowned for its olive trees and abundant olive oil.²⁷

These teachings elucidate the regional nature of Biblical food production. Many parts of the Land of Israel were known for the particular kinds of crops and produce native to them, and the tribes from these areas became known for their produce. The others of the nation knew that the members of the tribe of Yehuda grew their grapes, those in Asher made olive oil, those in Issachar harvested the fruit. A biblical Jew could, if he or she chose, trace the relatively short journey of each item from the region of Israel, via the specific tribe, to their plates.

Where Our Food Comes From -- Today

¹⁷ Commentary to Genesis 3:17

¹⁸ This description occurs many times in the Torah, including in Numbers 34:13.

¹⁹ The Maharsha, 1555-1631, Poland, commentary to Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menachot, p. 103b

²⁰ Psalms 128:2. The Talmudic sage Rabbi Ahai ben Yoshiya expresses the value of eating food one has grown him or herself: “During the time that a person eats from what he has grown himself—his mind is tranquil. Even one who eats from that which his father has grown or from that of his mother’s or son’s, his mind is not tranquil—and you do not [even] need to say [food grown] from that of others [non-relatives].” (Avot d’Rabbi Natan, version 1, chapter 30, translation by Hazon.) The rabbis understand this to be a teaching about food security—of being assured about where one’s next meal will come from. Ultimately, Rabbi Ahai understands that this can only occur when a person grows his or her own food.

²¹ Genesis 49:11

²² Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 98:9; Rashi to Genesis 49:11, s.v. *osri lagefen iryo* The Talmud describes the grapes and wine grown in the lands of Judah: “Any palate that tastes it says, ‘Give me! Give me!’” Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ketubot 111b

²³ Genesis 49:15

²⁴ Rashi to Genesis 49:15

²⁵ Rashi to Genesis 49:15 based on Targum Onkelos and Bereshith Rabbathi

²⁶ Rashi to Genesis 49:21

²⁷ Rashi to Genesis 49:20

Rabbi Edels, who wrote that when Jews lived in the land of Israel every family had land, also wrote, “But from when they were exiled, they did not have land to plant.”²⁸ The denial of land ownership to Jews was one factor contributing to the historical shift among Jews away from agriculture. Today, for a variety of reasons, the vast majority of Jews do not work in agriculture. In Israel, in 2009 2.1% of all employed Israeli residents worked in agriculture (including supporting services), a decrease from 4.2% of Israeli citizens working in agriculture in 1990.²⁹ Of the small number of Israeli citizens working in agriculture, Jews are perhaps only five to ten percent.³⁰ Among those Israeli Jews who do work in agriculture, many manage industrial agricultural operations employing non-Jewish workers. The shifts away from agriculture are evident among people globally and especially in the Western world. In the United States, less than 1% claim farming as an occupation.³¹

This shift contains profound religious, social, and ecological significance.³² After thousands of years of specialization within human society, it seems unlikely that large numbers of people will choose to return to a subsistence lifestyle.³³ Contemporary Jews, along with most Westerners, have lost most connection to the origins of their food, including the people who plant, pick, and transport it or the place where it is grown. We buy our industrially produced and packaged food in supermarkets that are identical from Brooklyn to Brookline and from Skokie to Silver Spring. The typical item of food on an American dinner plate has traveled 1500 miles.³⁴

Does this matter? In his influential book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan argues that it matters very much. Pollan claims that the industrial food chain relies on a thick veil of ignorance being cast between us and the process of production. From meat raised in CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations), to corn-fed cattle emitting methane, to the raising of monoculture fruits, vegetables and grains, to the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides on our produce, we simply do not know, and perhaps do not want to know, too much about how what we eat arrives on the supermarket shelves.

If we were fully aware of the cruelty frequently involved in raising our food, the environmental degradation caused by growing it, the health risks to consumers in processing and preserving it, and the immense expenditure of fossil fuels in transporting it, we would be troubled-- if not repulsed. Modern food production and consumption contributes to a host of environmental problems, including rainforest deforestation (to clear land for cattle and crops) and impact on water. Runoff of agricultural byproducts, including nitrogen fertilizers and animal wastes, enter bodies of water with major effects. In the Midwestern United States this has caused one of the world's largest 'Dead Zones' in the Gulf of Mexico. High levels of nitrogen and phosphorus in the Gulf of Mexico have resulted in blooms of algae, which depletes oxygen in the Gulf and results in the decline of

²⁸ The Maharsha, 1555-1631, Poland, commentary to Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menachot, p. 103b

²⁹ From the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, online at http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/?Mival=cw_usr_view_SHTML&ID=418 See also “Agriculture in Israel 2004,” Statistifile No. 55, online at http://www1.cbs.gov.il/www/statistical/agri04_e.pdf They also note that “the percentage of persons employed in agriculture in Israel is one of the lowest in the world, resembling that in the US and Canada. By comparison, in Greece the share is 15% and in Jordan 10%.” In economics, this phenomenon is called ‘structural transformation’ of an economy.

³⁰ Maariv online news (Hebrew), “Poll: Only 14 percent of those employed in agriculture are Jews,” by Dahlia Mazori, 5.17.2010, online at <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/108/007.html> The article notes that “According to Ami Bergman, director of the Sting Systems polling company, the survey data include only legal workers who were paid, but many of the foreign workers - about 40 percent is estimated - are illegal and therefore not listed in the survey.” Based on this, I estimate that 5 to 10 percent of agricultural workers are Jews.

³¹ <http://www.epa.gov/agriculture/ag101/demographics.html> According to a different source, in 2009 just 0.7% claimed farming, forestry, and fishing (all of whom are defined as agriculture) as their occupation. See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2048.html>

³² For example, at a religious level, following the destruction of the second Temple, Jews no longer bring first-fruit offerings from their crops to Jerusalem.

³³ In *The Rational Optimist*, Matt Ridley compares life in modern society to that of subsistence farmers and explains the many ways in which our standard of living has improved as reasons for why a voluntary return to subsistence living is unlikely.

³⁴ Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, New York, Penguin, 2006. p. 239

many other forms of sea life.³⁵

The production, transportation, refrigeration, and disposal of food also contribute to climate change. In 2006, agriculture contributed about 20% of greenhouse gas emissions globally.³⁶ The production of red meat is one of the single largest contributors to global climate change. This is because the digestive system of cattle produces methane, a potent greenhouse gas, which is exhaled.³⁷ According to a study by scientists at Carnegie Mellon University, reducing or eliminating red meat intake would have a far greater impact in reducing greenhouse gas emissions than buying all of one's food locally.³⁸

The globalization of food production and consumption also means that a drought in one part of the world impacts the price of food in another part. This is especially important when high costs limit the ability of the poor to buy food. For example, the World Bank reported that from June to July, 2012, the price of corn and wheat rose by 25 percent each to record highs, and the price of soybeans by 17 percent. These price increases are due to weather events in a number of countries, including drought occurring in the lands of major food exporters such as the U.S., Russia, the Ukraine, and Brazil.³⁹ James Hansen, director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, expressed "a high degree of confidence" that the extreme heatwaves in Europe in 2003 and Russia in 2010, as well as the Texas and Oklahoma droughts of 2011, were "a consequence of climate change."⁴⁰ With the increasing reality of climate change, the reliance on a few countries for food staples increases food vulnerability for all.

Finally, the link between *how much* we eat and the environmental 'footprint' has been made clear by several studies. Adults in the United States on average eat 500 calories more per day (about one large hamburger) than they did in the 1970s.⁴¹ Between 1983 and 2000, US food availability (food consumption including waste) increased by 18%, requiring an additional 3.1% of total US energy consumption as well as more land and water to produce the food.⁴² By 2006, agriculture contributed about 20% of greenhouse gas emissions globally, making it a major factor in addressing global climate change.⁴³ Modern food production and consumption also contributes to rainforest deforestation (to clear land for cattle and crops) and water pollution (from pesticide and fertilizer use). Expanding agriculture to meet growing demand based on overeating only exacerbates these

³⁵ For more information, see the Carleton College Science Information Resource Center at <http://serc.carleton.edu/microbelife/topics/deadzone/>

³⁶ "Climate Change and Agriculture," 2006, Martin Parry and Cynthia Rosenzweig, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (U.K. Meteorological Office and Goddard Institute for Space Studies), online at http://cgiar.bio-mirror.cn/pdf/agm06/agm06_ParryRosenzweig_climatechange%26agr.pdf

³⁷ See US Environmental Protection Agency, "US Greenhouse Gas Inventory 2012," Chapter 6: Agriculture, section 6.1 of <http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/Downloads/ghgemissions/US-GHG-Inventory-2012-Chapter-6-Agriculture.pdf> In addition, a second source of methane from cattle is from the anaerobic decomposition of their manure (see section 6.2).

³⁸ "Food-Miles and the Relative Climate Impacts of Food Choices in the United States," Dr. Christopher Weber and Dr. H. Scott Matthews, *Environmental Science & Technology*. 2008, 42 (10), pp 3508–3513, online at <http://pubs.acs.org/doi/full/10.1021/es702969f> The article notes that "shifting less than one day per week's worth of calories from red meat and dairy products to chicken, fish, eggs, or a vegetable-based diet achieves more greenhouse-gas reduction than buying all locally sourced food."

³⁹ The full report is available at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTPOVERTY/Resources/336991-1311966520397/Food-Price-Watch-August-2012.pdf>, and the press release, "Severe Droughts Drive Food Prices Higher, Threatening the Poor," The World Bank, August 30, 2012, is online at <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/2012/08/30/severe-droughts-drive-food-prices-higher-threatening-poor>

⁴⁰ As reported by Reuters, "Climate change poses risks to food, beyond U.S. drought," by Alistar Doyle, 8.12.12, online at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/16/us-climate-drought-idUSBRE87F0RY20120816>

⁴¹ "Increased food intake alone explains the increase in body weight in the United States," Boyd Swinburn *et al.* oral presentation, 17th European Congress on Obesity, 5.9.2009, news abstract online at <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/149553.php> The researchers consider this increased food consumption to be the leading cause of the obesity epidemic.

⁴² "Luxus Consumption: Wasting Food Resources Through Overeating," By Dr. Dorothy Blair and Dr. Jeffery Sobal, *Agriculture and Human Values*, Volume 23, Number 1 (2006), p. 63-74

⁴⁴ Indeed, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches that the eating of Israel brings G-d, Blessed be He, and the Shechina (G-d's Immanent Presence) face to face (Likutei Moharan I 62:1).

impacts.

Toward a Return to Repaired Consumption of Food

Knowledge is power, but it also creates responsibility. How can we develop the knowledge, and exercise the ethical responsibility that comes with knowledge about the sources of our food? If we make an effort to know the people who grow our food, we can take a measure of responsibility for how it is grown and how it reaches us. Pollan quotes Joel Salatin, owner of Polyface Farm, a pesticide and fertilizer free farm where the animals are all free-range: “The only meaningful guarantee of integrity is when buyers and sellers can look one another in the eye.”

It is unquestionably a challenge for the urban and suburban Jew to achieve this. One small way to close the gap between food producer and food consumer is through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects. City-dwellers or suburbanites subscribe at the beginning of the growing season, pay several hundred dollars for the season, and receive a box of produce each week. Thousands of Jews subscribe to CSAs, in part based on the conviction that we need to consider the full range of ethical issues involved in our food’s production. A second way to purchase local food is through farmer’s markets, which can also offer the chance to meet local farmers.

Another way is by appreciating the food we eat and eating it in holiness. The Jewish teachings mentioned above regarding mindful eating provide us helpful guidance. These include eating only when we are hungry, to fulfill our body’s needs, slowly and consciously, at a table, and preferably with others while sharing Jewish wisdom. When we eat with greater intention and awareness, we will likely consume less because we will be more attuned to what our bodies actually need. This will also reduce the impact our food consumption has on the environment.

Bringing awareness and holiness to our consumption of food can generate profound healing to ourselves, our communities, and our planet. At the individual level, one who eats in a proper way will feel healthier and more connected to the Infinite. At the communal level, conscious eating can bring members of the community together and inspire others to join the community. At the global level, the changes we make in our food consumption will affect people, animals and plants in faraway places.

Embedded within urban, modern society, we can still reclaim a level of sanctity, balance, and sustainability in our food consumption. Jewish teachings can help us make our way back from the tortured complexity of the industrial food chain towards a healthier relationship with what we eat.

In light of the centrality of food to the human experience, repairing the way we relate to food *can* make a difference for ourselves, our community, and the earth. By repairing the way we eat and the way we relate to food, we can help address many crises facing modern society: health, environmental, and social. May we eat with intention, and in so doing, help bring the world closer to its perfected state.⁴⁴

About the Authors:

Rabbi Yonatan Neril founded and directs Jewish Eco Seminars, which engages and educates the Jewish community with Jewish environmental wisdom. Since 2006, he has worked with Canfei Nesharim in developing educational resources relating to Judaism and the environment. He received a BA and MA from Stanford University, during which time he conducted research in Mexico on food issues. He completed his rabbinic studies at Yeshivat Hamivtar, and lives with his family in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Yedidya (Julian) Sinclair is a writer and teacher. He is Senior Rabbinical Scholar at Hazon. Previously he was campus rabbi at Cambridge University where he also taught in the Divinity School. Rabbi Sinclair earns a

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living working in clean tech in Israel. He is currently Vice President and Head of Research at Gigawatt Global, an international solar developer. Before that he worked for two years on the founding team of Alma Ecocities Ltd where he was Director of Communications. He holds degrees from Oxford and Harvard Universities as well as Orthodox *semichah* and lives in Jerusalem.

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