

Take Control of Your Shabbat Meal



Q I love Shabbat, but I hate that it's become a battleground for my eating habits. I'm careful about dieting all week long, but when Friday comes around, I get thrown off course. Shabbat Chanukah is even more of a challenge with all the dreidel-shaped cookies and *sufganiyot* around. Please help!

A What you're describing is not uncommon. Many people have confided in me that, in addition to avoiding *melachah* on Shabbat and *yom tov*, on these "days of rest" they also take a break from healthy eating habits. Large festive meals (often lengthened by singing and *divrei Torah*), an abundance of delicious food

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and a peaceful Shabbat or *yom tov* atmosphere encourage many to relax their usual vigilance over food intake and to indulge.

Of course, overeating during special occasions is not limited to Orthodox Jews. This time of year, holiday parties and vacations encourage gluttony and result in weight gain for most Americans. Unfortunately, those who are already overweight tend to gain more weight than average, most of which stays with them until next year's holiday season, where they add on more weight.^{1,2} When you compound this with Thanksgiving-like meals every weekend, it's a wonder *frum* Jews aren't even more overweight! And be honest—does your Shabbat indulging really end with Havdalah, or do you nibble on chocolate cake leftovers until Monday or Tuesday?

The crux of this challenge lies in the fact that Shabbat is supposed to be

special. On the verse "Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it," Rashi explains that if one comes across something special during the week, he should save it for Shabbat.³ Shabbat is meant to be a day of extravagances—including delicious foods—that elevate it from the rest of the week. And although this may sound like the antithesis of dieting, you *can* treat yourself on Shabbat and still stay within traditional nutrition guidelines. Treating yourself in moderation is a common nutrition philosophy and one espoused by prominent registered dietitian Joy Bauer, MS, RD. In her book *The 90/10 Weight Loss Plan*, Bauer promises weight loss by choosing healthy foods 90 percent of the time and spending the remaining 10 percent of your calories on what she calls "Fun Foods."⁴

So a piece of *kugel* or a *dreidel*-shaped cookie should not wreak havoc on the rest of your weight-loss plan.

But how do you make sure that that little treat doesn't spiral into a huge binge? With a tableful of temptation in front of you, it isn't always easy to say no to seconds (or thirds). To that end, I've pulled together a few proven strategies to help you enjoy your meal without going overboard. Many of these ideas were gleaned from the research of Charles Platkin, JD, MPH, a health and fitness writer, found in his book *Breaking the Pattern: The 5 Principles You Need to Remodel Your Life*⁵ as well as that of Brian Wansink, PhD, a professor of marketing and nutritional science at Cornell University, detailed in his book *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think*.⁶

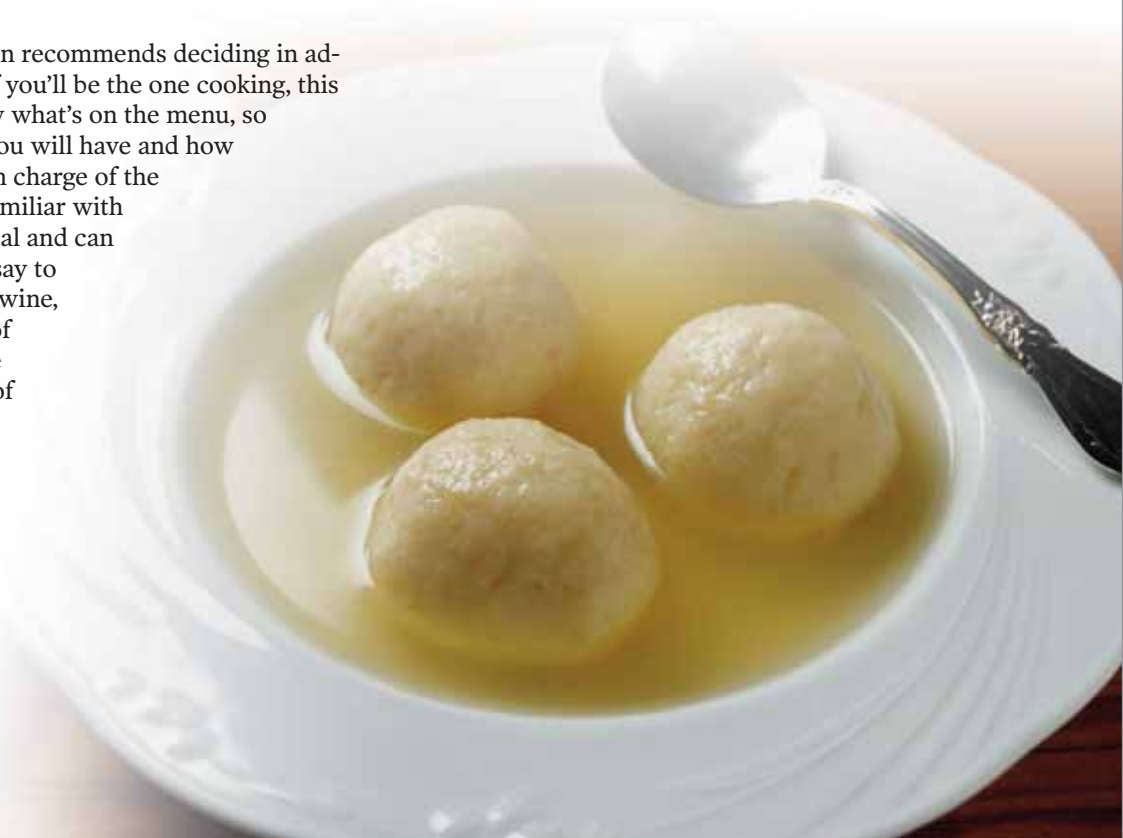
Here's what you need to do to keep your eating under control on Shabbat:

- Plan ahead. Dr. Platkin recommends deciding in advance what you will eat. If you'll be the one cooking, this should be easy—you know what's on the menu, so decide beforehand what you will have and how much. Even if you're not in charge of the food, you're doubtlessly familiar with the basics of a Shabbat meal and can plan accordingly. That is, say to yourself, "I'll have a bit of wine, no more than two pieces of challah, one helping of the main course, about a cup of salad and one piece of kugel or other side dish. Oh and one *dreidel* cookie—that's all." With a food "script" like this, you have specific guidelines to stick to, which make it easier for you to control your intake.

- Vary your serving dishes. In one of Dr.

Wansink's studies, he hosted a party to study how the size of serving dishes affects food intake. The party was split into two rooms, each with the same amount of Chex Mix for guests. One room, however, had two big bowls of the snack, while the other had four smaller bowls. Dr. Wansink found that the guests in the room with the large bowls ate almost 60 percent more Chex Mix. Use these results to your advantage. If you're serving vegetables and other healthy foods, use large serving dishes, but offer less-healthy foods in smaller dishes (or just skip them!).

- Prepare fewer types of foods. Variety may be the spice of life, but it's also one reason we eat as much as we do. When you can only choose from a limited number of foods, you eat less because of a concept called sensory specific



Shabbat and Yom Tov Meals Do's and Don'ts

Do!

- Enjoy the whole experience. Take in the singing, the conversation and the *divrei Torah*. Your Shabbat or *yom tov* meal is about so much more than food.
- Get up and help serve or clear the table if you feel you really can't control your food intake.
- Drink water or other calorie-free beverages throughout the meal. It will help fill you up and slow down your eating so you feel satisfied more quickly.
- Be consistent with regard to food. If you're invited as a guest, bring wine or fresh fruit as a gift in lieu of a fancy cake or tray of candies.

Don't!

- Skip meals or starve yourself before a big meal—you'll have a harder time controlling what you eat later.
- Prepare unhealthy foods you know will be too much of a temptation for you.
- Waste calories on something you don't like just because it's "low-fat." You won't feel satisfied and will probably eat too much. If you're going to treat yourself, make sure it's a food you really enjoy.
- Stuff yourself. Part of *oneg Shabbat* is feeling good *after* the meal, too, which can be difficult if you're full and uncomfortable.

satiety; your taste buds and other senses become satisfied more quickly, and eating more won't add additional pleasure, so you stop. Dr. Wansink found that when people are offered greater variety, they'll eat more—even if there is no difference in taste! For example, in one study on candy, participants ate 75 percent more M&M's when they chose from ten different colors, compared to those who chose from only seven colors—even though color doesn't change the taste at all!⁷ So conquer your urge to whip up yet another *kugel* or dessert—I assure you, you have plenty of food!

- Don't fill your up plate. Research shows you can serve yourself up to 20 percent less food and feel just as satisfied. If you must, fill up that missing 20 percent with extra vegetables or a healthful salad. Dr. Wansink also recommends setting the table with smaller plates so smaller portions fill them—the larger our plates and bowls, the more we tend to eat.⁸ (Another reason you need new china...)

- Focus on vegetables. You can still enjoy fish, poultry or meat, but make

sure to fill at least half your plate with veggies. Pack your soup with lots of vegetables, and prepare at least one salad or vegetable dish. But here's a heads up about salads and dressings—an unhealthy dressing *can* ruin a salad! It is considerate to prepare a “naked salad” and serve the dressing in a pretty bowl on the side. That way each person can control the amount he or she wants to use. If you must dress the salad beforehand, use an oil-based dressing—without sugar, if possible; there are lots of great flavored vinegars available that are low calorie. Dressings like thousand island have sixty calories per serving. When it comes to balsamic vinegar—just ten calories per tablespoon—there's no comparison!

- Watch the healthy foods! It's true that whole wheat bread, brown rice, salmon, nuts and other wholesome foods offer real health benefits, but you *can* have too much of a good thing. Stop seeing health foods as “free” foods. Dr. Wansink reports that when people think a product is healthier—such as low-fat granola versus regular granola—they tend to eat more, and

those calories add up fast.⁹ Regardless of the particular food, you must always be wary of portion size.

Many people may have no problem choosing moderate amounts of healthy food on Shabbat and other special occasions. But if you find yourself struggling with controlling how much you eat, try implementing a few of these strategies. Or come up with your own unique ideas to control your intake. Remember, the best strategies are the ones that work for you! ■

Notes

1. S.B. Roberts and J. Mayer, “Holiday Weight Gain: Fact or Fiction?” *Nutrition Review* 58 (2000): 378-379
2. Holly R. Hull, Duncan Radley, Mary K. Dinger and David A. Fields, “The Effect of the Thanksgiving Holiday on Weight Gain,” *Nutrition Journal* 21 (2006): 29
3. Exodus 20:8
4. Los Angeles, 2001
5. New York, 2002
6. New York, 2006
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

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