

How You Are ~~What~~ You Eat

By Abraham J. Twerski

The man painting our apartment in Israel took out his lunch, washed his hands and recited the *Hamotzi*. Then he touched the bread and kissed his hand as if he were touching a *sefer Torah* or a *mezuzah*. Never having seen this before, I asked why he did it. He looked at me, bewildered.

“This bread is *kadosh* (sacred). I just said *Hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz*. Hashem brought this bread from the earth. Since Hashem brought it forth, it is *kadosh*.”

I felt ashamed. I had never quite thought of it that way. True, when we wash our hands for a meal, we recite a *brachah*. The ritual washing is a rabbinic injunction to liken us to the *Kohanim* who washed their hands before eating sanctified food. The ritual was intended to make us think of food as holy. Unfortunately, we often wash our hands and recite the *brachah* by rote, giving little thought to the inherent *kedushah* of bread.

After Adam sinned, God cursed him, saying, “Thorns and thistles shall it [the earth] sprout for you and you shall eat the herbs of the field.” The

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Gemara¹ states that upon hearing this, Adam began to cry. He realized that from now on he would be forced to eat from the field, just like the animals. He feared that this would lead to his eating the way animals do: simply to satisfy hunger. Adam knew that how and why we eat is essentially what distinguishes us from animals.

For what reason would a highly spiritual person eat? He would eat purpose-

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fully: to provide his body with essential nutrients so that he could fulfill God's will. Gustatory delights would not enter into the equation.

Recently, I was a guest at a home where an eight-year-old was eating with the adults. The mother was appalled when the child began licking the gravy off his fingers. “Stop eating like an animal!” she said. I could not help but think that we might all be better off if we ate as animals. Animals in their natural habitat are not obese. Once an animal's nutritional needs have been met, it will not touch another morsel of food. Humans, on the other hand, often eat beyond the body's nutritional

needs. How frequently do we reach for something to nibble on when we are upset? Obesity is, in fact, often the result of using food as a drug. A serious health problem, obesity is one of the leading causes of death in the United States. True, there are differences in metabolism. Some people seem to gain weight much easier than others. And, to be fair, I might add that oftentimes certain medications that people need cause them to gain unnatural amounts of weight. Yet, in the final analysis, weight control is, for the most part, an input-output phenomenon. People who gain weight easily should exercise more and restrict their intake to the essentials necessary for healthy body function. While it may not be an easy regimen to follow, we must bear in mind the serious consequences of excess weight.


Even though we may have drifted far from the spiritual heights of Adam before the sin, we have the capacity to rise above the level of animals. The Torah says, “Know Him in all your ways.”² Rambam explains that a person should not restrict his relationship with Hashem to the actual performance of *mitzvos*. Rather, everything that a person does should be directed to fulfilling God's will. Inasmuch as that can best be achieved when a person is in optimal health, everything one does for the purpose of maintaining his health is considered part of Torah observance. In this view, eating, resting and all that a person does in order to function properly are actual *mitzvos*.

This does not mean that we should not derive any pleasure from the foods we eat. We may not all be able to emu-

late those great *tzaddikim* who wished to avoid earthly pleasures and ate only tasteless food. In Psalms,³ the verse states “Taste and see that Hashem is good.” Commenting on that verse, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev said that God could have made food tasteless, and we would have eaten it solely to survive. However, in His goodness, He made it taste good and appear pleasant to the eye. Indeed, God wanted us to enjoy His handiwork and derive pleasure from His creations. However, while we may enjoy our food and appreciate God’s kindness in blessing us with varieties of taste, as with all the other pleasures of life, we should not become indulgent.

Not too long ago, I attended a convention where an extravagant dinner was served. After the meal, the guests were invited to sample from a Viennese table which was piled high with pastries and cakes of every conceivable kind. I could not believe what I saw. Many of the guests fell upon these tables as though they had not eaten for days. That is indulgence.

In his commentary on Torah, Ramban says that the statement “*kedoshim tihiyu*”⁴ (You shall be holy) requires that one aspiring to holiness should go beyond simply avoiding that which is prohibited. One can be technically observant of all Torah precepts yet be indulgent. “You shall be holy” means that one should partake of what is permissible solely to the degree that is necessary for good health so that one may be in optimal condition for serving Hashem. If this goal were achieved, it is unlikely that one would suffer from the devastating consequences of abusing food, whether it be obesity or anorexia nervosa.

By fulfilling our mandate of *kedoshim tihiyu*, it is not only food that becomes *kadosh*, as the man who kissed the bread stated. We can make the process of eating *kadosh*. Indeed, we are obligated to do so. 

Notes

1. *Pesachim* 118a
2. Proverbs 2:6
3. 34:9
4. Leviticus 19:2