

“And You Shall Eat and Be Satisfied”:

The Torah’s Approach to Healthy Eating

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The Talmud (Yoma 74b) teaches, “The blind eat but are not satisfied.” The commentators explain that a blind person cannot be truly satisfied by his food because he cannot see his food. What does it mean to be “blind” when it comes to eating? What does it mean to be unable to “see” one’s food?

Aside from its literal meaning, perhaps this statement has a spiritual meaning as well. For our purposes, we might suggest that this has a deeper philosophical message for us. If we remain “blind” to the supra-physical dimension of eating, we cannot derive satisfaction from our food.

Consider Elizabeth Bowen’s wise adage, “We can live in the shadow of an idea without grasping it.” Too many Torah-observant Jews live out our lives without ever really grasping the idea of eating; we live in its shadow. And we miss the most important lessons, lessons that have significance for all of the rest of our lives. We miss out on an important relationship with G-d.

We cannot afford to remain “blind” to the full dimension of the eating experience. To be successful at eating, to be able to derive the full-spectrum nourishment that food has to offer our bodies and our souls, and to be able to stop eating after we have become satiated – for all of that, we dare not remain “blind.”

Indeed, the Talmud is telling us something profound. If we remain “blind” to or oblivious of the true significance of eating, we will not – indeed, cannot – attain true s’viah (complete satisfaction). If we cannot see the food for what it is – i.e., a gift from G-d and an expression of His love for us – then our eating and our relationship with food will be a never-ending source of frustration for us. If we remain “blind” to the true significance of our eating, we will be incapable of extracting the nutrients and deriving the satisfaction we need from our food, the satisfaction that will allow us to eat properly and moderately.

EATING: Doubly Beneficial

To understand why people overeat, we must first understand why people eat. It’s actually more complicated than it appears. Consider the following fundamental thesis, which can account for many, if not most, of the bizarre eating patterns we have observed.

There are two dimensions to a person’s eating – that is, we seek two things from the food we eat: sustenance for our body and sustenance for our soul. Our body seeks its nutrients, and our soul seeks its nutrients. Amazingly, food has the ability to provide nutrients for both components of a human being. Food offers vitamins, minerals, proteins, carbohydrates, fats, and other materials essential for the human body to function, repair it, and thrive. In addition, food has the capacity to provide evidence

of Divine interest, love, confidence, and protection for the human soul to function, repair itself, and thrive – IF we know how to derive these life-giving elements.

Accordingly, if used properly, food plays two important roles – that is, it provides two benefits. It offers physical fuel for the body, and spiritual sustenance as well. Sadly, most people are oblivious to the spiritual dimension – and it costs us in a “big” way!

To differentiate between the two dimensions, let us use the following terminology: A person eats to be “filled” and to be “fulfilled” – he seeks to “fill” his body and to “fulfill” his soul. The fallacy for most of us is that we undervalue the importance of “fulfillment,” when in reality it is the more important of the two elements.

Only a small percentage of eating takes place to nourish the body. Most eating takes place because people are trying to nourish their souls. In other words, people begin to eat to nourish their bodies; if they continue eating or, more importantly, if they can’t stop eating, it is because they haven’t been able to acquire the nourishment for their soul that they crave. A person will continue to eat until he has attained both.

We eat to be “filled” and “fulfilled.” It is relatively easy to become “filled,” but it is much more difficult to reach the state of being “fulfilled.” We stop when we are fulfilled – or, if we fail to reach that, when we are so stuffed physically that we can’t eat another bite. A person will continue to eat until he has reached the state of being “fulfilled,” even though this is long after he has become “filled.” However, many, perhaps most, people stop eating long before they have reached the state of being “fulfilled” simply because of the physical limitations of their bodies – that is, they still desire to eat because they seek “fulfillment,” but their bodies simply cannot hold any more food. They are stuffed to capacity and end the session of eating with frustration and dissatisfaction. They feel as if they have been denied something that they are looking for, and sense that they have not gotten what they wanted from the food. Sound familiar?

They are looking for something. What are they looking for? They’re already “filled”!

What they seek, usually subconsciously, is “fulfillment.” Their souls seek G-d’s presence in the food – their souls seek their nourishment from the food.

I call the “fulfillment” derived from food “s’viah” [lit. satisfaction]. People are not satisfied from food until they have acquired s’viah, even if they consumed tremendous quantities of food and are no longer physically hungry. Satiety is a function of being fulfilled, NOT a function of being filled. “S’viah” is the recognition that food brings with it additional nourishment; it is the spiritual perception of having acquired an additional component, above and beyond mere physical nourishment. Our eating – more, its cessation – is a function of our fulfillment, our s’viah. It is a difficult truth that we only stop eating when we are fulfilled; we don’t stop eating when we are filled.

If we don't have the right hashkafah (spiritual outlook), if we don't learn how to extract the real nutrients we need from the food we eat, then we, like the pop singer, will be doomed to wail, "I can't get no satisfaction." And the reason is simple: Our neshamas (souls) aren't getting their share!

We can now understand the verse in Devarim (8:10) and its Rabbinic interpretation:

"You shall eat and be satisfied, and you shall bless G-d."

The Rabbis explain:

* "You shall eat": You shall ingest the food and derive the physical nourishment the food has to offer. [i.e., You shall be filled.]

* "You shall be satisfied": You shall consider the spiritual implications inherent in the food and derive the non-physical nourishment the food has to offer. [i.e., You shall be fulfilled.]

* Then, and only then, when you have derived the full-spectrum nourishment that food has to offer and you are truly both filled and fulfilled – can you fully and wholeheartedly, with the totality of your being, "bless G-d."

We might define a concept comparable to the notion of "bio-availability" [how available the nutrients within a food are for the body to use], but this index would be a function of a person and their soul: "s'viah-capability," a person's ability to recognize the spiritual treasures inherent within food. "Bio-availability" is a feature of the food; "s'viah-capability" is a feature of the person. How prepared is the person to absorb the spiritual nutrients that food has to offer? Consider this beautiful story:

Once, the Baal Shem Tov visited the home of Rabbi Yaakov Koppel in Kolomaya on the night of Shabbat and watched him dance ecstatically in front of his Shabbat table for an hour. Later, the Baal Shem Tov asked him, "Why do you sing and dance this way before eating?" Rabbi Yaakov Koppel answered, "Before I partake of the physical food, I first stand in front of the table and absorb the food's spiritual essence. Sometimes, I become so enthused that I sing and dance."

We would do well to emulate Rabbi Yaakov Koppel. I'm willing to bet that Rabbi Koppel, capable as he was of absorbing the spiritual nutrients that his food had to offer, was not overweight and did not have an eating disorder. Clearly, he understood the importance before eating of "meditating" on the food's spiritual aspect: that it has been created and is being kept in existence (like all created things) every minute by G-d's will. He has created this food to nourish us and to provide for us. Why? Because He is our Father and He loves us.

This is clearly the spiritual message that we must be able to absorb. If we don't, we keep eating (looking in vain) for the love, comfort, protection, etc. that we need – that is there, ironically, in the food, if we but open our eyes. With this understanding, we can correct a commonly held misconception and replace it with a basic thesis: Our fundamental "sin" is NOT that we've been eating and enjoying food TOO much; rather, that we haven't been enjoying it ENOUGH! We are taking in food, but not absorbing

all the “nutrients” that it has to offer – all the “nutrients” that we are supposed to take out of it. As a result, we eat more, all in the hope of getting what we need.

Now we can explain why people overeat. Quite simply, they overeat because they are starving, not due to lack of control. The food does have the ability to give them what they seek. They simply do not know how to process their food fully. They are “filled,” but they are nowhere near being “fulfilled.” And so they continue to eat.

“All of a person’s efforts are for his mouth, but the soul is not filled.” (Koheles 6:7)

If we aren’t processing the food properly, we could eat an INFINITE amount (at least it seems that way!) and still not get the nourishment we desperately need. Therefore, the more conscious you are of the spiritual component inherent in food, the better able you are to be fulfilled from your food. You will be reaching “fulfillment” at a rate somewhat comparable to the rate at which you reach being “filled,” and you will be able to stop eating sooner, and you will be content.

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The concept of “s’viah” listed above is not limited to eating. It is a fundamental precept in the Torah that we derive “s’viah” from all components of the physical world.

A regimen of proper eating as the Torah prescribes can prepare us to interact properly and successfully as Jews with the entire physical world that G-d created. No other activity has that same ability. That is how central eating is to all of life. If we know how to eat properly, we can be successful in all aspects of life. We can serve G-d properly. Conversely, if we do not know how to eat properly, then we will not know how to be successful in any aspects of our lives, and we will lose the opportunity to serve G-d properly.

Let me further explain that idea. Consider a teaching from my book Marital Intimacy [Compass Books, 2005]:

The Torah lauds the enjoyment of physical pleasure as desirable, since each pleasure provides an opportunity to feel and express gratitude to the One who created and provided this enjoyment. The Torah begins with the premise that the A-mighty created the physical universe and presented it to the first humans for their use and enjoyment. The myriad delights were created for the purpose of bestowing pleasure on humanity.

Most people believe that the first commandment that the A-mighty gave Adam and Eve was a prohibition against eating from the Tree of Knowledge. This commandment is often understood as an expression of G-d’s desire to forbid – or, at least, restrict – the physical pleasure and enjoyment of worldly delights allowed to humankind. The author of the Meshech Chochmah, R. Meir Simcha of D’vinsk (the

“Ohr Somayach”), explains that the first commandment addressed to the first humans was, in fact, a positive commandment: “From every tree in the garden you shall surely eat” (Bereshis 2:16), followed

only then by the qualifying restriction not to eat from the one forbidden tree. The goodness and enjoyability of the world and the creation of countless delights were not mere frivolous, unnecessary auxiliaries, unrelated to the mission of humankind. The A-mighty put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden so that they could enjoy the pleasures and delights that He had created. The prohibition of eating from the Tree of Knowledge was a minor modification of the expansive positive commandment to eat from all the trees in the Garden. The A-mighty allowed and hallowed much more than He forbade.

The Meshech Chochmah concludes that the reason for the failure of Adam and Eve to observe and abide by the prohibition was their failure to appreciate the mitzvah-aspect of, the Divine desire in, the directive of “you shall surely eat.” Instead, they regarded it as optional, and neutral – something existing outside the sphere of mitzvah. The Meshech Chochmah maintains that had they truly appreciated and fulfilled this positive commandment to experience and enjoy all the delights of the Garden, they would not have succumbed to transgressing the negative prohibition that resulted in their expulsion from the paradise of the Garden of Eden. Their failure to recognize the mitzvah-aspect of this enjoyment accounts for all of humanity’s subsequent struggle, suffering, and turbulence. G-d’s creation of physical, worldly pleasure is not insignificant, frivolous, or incidental. As the Meshech Chochmah explains, it is a vital, indispensable part of the service of G-d, one that cannot be ignored or dismissed.

The obligatory aspect of this enjoyment of the permitted physical pleasures of the world, is stressed in this statement of the Jerusalem Talmud: “R. Chizkiyah the son of R. Cohen said in the name of Rav: On the Day of Judgment, a person will be required to give an accounting for all [permissible enjoyments] that his eyes beheld and he did not partake of.” (Yerushalmi, end of Kiddushin)The Korban HaEidah explains that an accounting will be necessary because one sinned against his soul in that he afflicted it for no reason [by withholding these delights].

This is where Judaism diverges fundamentally from other religious systems; this is what gives Judaism its unique essential character. Christianity turns a jaundiced eye on this world and its pleasures, and demands from its adherents a strict, complete denial of, and abstention from this world and all it has to offer in return for a promise of reward in the next world. Any partaking of, or involvement in, physical things is condemned as weakness and compromise, a submission to the base, animal, evil desires contained within every sinful human soul. Christian philosophy pits physical against spiritual. Nothing the Torah states could be farther from the truth! Judaism teaches that only someone who has learned to experience and appreciate pleasure in this world, and has learned to express gratitude for these pleasures to “the One who spoke and created the world,” will be capable of fully appreciating and praising the A-mighty’s greatness and benevolence in the next world.

The Torah, then, does not posit any inherent conflict between the physical and spiritual aspects of Creation.

Note this fundamental lesson: Adam and Eve failed to observe and abide by the prohibition because they did not derive “fulfillment” from the food they had already eaten. Since they failed to appreciate the spiritual component of [i.e., G-d’s love for them and His desire that they enjoy all the delights of the Garden, delights that He had created as an expression of His love for them] the food they were allowed

to eat, they were not satisfied by the food they ate. They desired more because they lacked a spiritual infusion. They had not received it from the food they had eaten. That's why they ate from the forbidden tree – because they believed that it could offer them spiritual sustenance, sustenance that they had not derived from the food they were eating. Why didn't they derive sustenance from the food they had eaten? Because they had failed to extract all the nutrients the food had to offer them.

G-d told Adam and Eve, "You shall surely eat," and they failed to recognize the dimension of G-d's love and concern in that command. Adam and Eve failed to adhere to their G-d-given diet because they failed to recognize the food they had been given for what it was— a gift from G-d, an expression of His love for them, His vote of confidence. They were not aware of the spiritual component of the food they had been given. They ate and were "filled," but they were not "fulfilled." They hungered for more – their souls had not been nourished. So they continued to eat. And their overeating got them into trouble. Sound familiar?

And, so, their inability to reach "s'viah," this failure to recognize the mitzvah-aspect of this enjoyment of food, accounts for all of humanity's subsequent suffering and struggle. And, indeed, when we overeat, we repeat the error that Adam and Eve made. Had they recognized that, with each delicious bite they took, they were dining on G-d's love, they would have enjoyed spiritual protection and fortification, and that would have strengthened them and helped them to not succumb to sin, and they certainly would not have disregarded G-d's special "diet" for them.

In other words, they failed to keep to a diet that the Ultimate Doctor had prescribed for them because they had not derived all the appropriate nutrients from the food that they were eating. What did they fail to ingest from the food? The "bioavailability" of the food was 100%, the Talmud teaches – it was absolutely perfect. The only thing they were missing, then, was the recognition that the food they were eating was an expression of G-d's love for them. Had they known that, had they recognized what the food represented, they would have possessed the strength of will and peace of mind and clarity to eat properly, with 100% "s'viah capability." They would have derived all the nourishment, physical and spiritual, that the food had to offer, and not violate the diet they had been given.

So, too, with each of us: If we can learn to recognize the dimension of G-d's love and concern for us that is present and inherent in every mouthful of food we do eat, we will derive the complete full spectrum of nourishment that the food has to offer us. We will be "filled" and "fulfilled," and we will stop eating.