

Pesakh I 5778

Because Pesakh falls on Shabbat, both this week and next, the regular Shabbat reading of Shemini is postponed until two weeks from now. However we did read from Shemini on Monday and Thursday mornings this week and, unusually, we will do so again the week after Pesakh. Food plays a prominent role in parshat Shemini, as it obviously also does on the holiday calendar this week, both the food that we eat and the food that is brought as a sacrifice to God. The sacrifices that the Torah has been describing for the last two Torah portions, and continues to focus on in Shemini, are the same things that people eat: meat, grain, wine. It may be easy to overlook the fact that the things our ancestors brought to burn on the altar for God were human food. The sages themselves would later go out of their way to make the point that God does not eat, that the sacrifices were merely symbolic. But the fact remains that the Torah does not ask for sacrifices of metals, wood, cloth or anything else that may have had value, only food. God does not eat, but the form of the sacrifices is such that their symbolism is: But if God did eat, this would be God's food. In addition to describing sacrifice, Parshat Shemini is also the source for many of the basic rules of kashrut. It defines or lists which animals of the land, water and air may be used for food. Tellingly, these are the same specific types of animals that could be offered on the altar to God; no animals prohibited for human consumption were permitted as a sacrifice to God, whether swine, seafood, or even kosher animals that were not properly slaughtered. The association of the food which the

Torah permits to Jews and the foods that were offered on the altar is extremely close: What is permissible to us is also what we offer before God.

Coincidentally, we are observing the most food-centric holiday on the Jewish calendar this week as we celebrate Pesakh. Jews around the world put aside leavened products for seder and for the week long (or eight day) commemoration of our ancestors leaving Egypt. The weekday reading, the Yom Tov reading and Pesakh itself all put us in mind of food this week and what our food represents.

Not coincidentally, we eat unleavened bread at seder. The traditional explanation is that matzah recalls the haste with which the Israelites left Egypt, too fast for the bread to rise; the Torah says as much itself. But it is also worth noting that offerings to God on the altar in the mishkan were unleavened, and that the *korban Pesakh* was the only sacrifice eaten outside the mishkan. What we might be seeing is that on Pesakh, we eat the kind of food that was burnt on the altar before God year-round. The Passover sacrifice was prepared and eaten by extended families, not only by the priestly families, in a sense extending priestly rites into the Israelites' homes. And just as the sacrifices on God's altar omitted leaven, the sacrifice that the people ate at their table would also omit leaven. It isn't only because of leaving Egypt quickly that we eat matzah; it is also because on Pesakh our tables become altars.

We know very well that food plays a prominent role in Jewish life, but too often we seem satisfied to treat that role merely as something quaint. Simply saying the words

‘Jews’ and ‘food’ usually gets a smile, but we’re missing what’s important about the connection when we let it go at that. For Jews, food is not only physical sustenance; it represents and implements a whole set of interlocking values. Everything about eating, what is permitted and prohibited, how food is prepared, what we say before and after eating it, the parts of the harvest that are to be left un-harvested, the prohibitions against mixing milk and meat and against ingesting blood, as well as holiday-specific symbols of matzah, latkes, hamentashen and so on, all create an integrated theology of food.

I often talk to Jews about their kashrut practices, and what I hear disturbs me. While I don’t judge people for what they choose to do or not do, I feel that not keeping kosher robs them of a deeper connection to that theology. We know that people want to feel something deeper from religious life. Survey after survey tells us that they are seeking moments of connection, of transcendence. Not to be too cute, they hunger for that. At the same time, many Jews seem to have no conception of how what they do, including what and how and when they eat, can both reflect and shape values. There are many explanations for why few Jews don’t keep kosher – cost, difficulty, and so on – but none of them are sufficient answers to the question “Why aren’t Jewish values important to you?” Because if the values of feeding the poor, caring for the environment and for the animal world, feeling grateful for what we have, respecting life, developing discipline, and on and on aren’t for Jews, then we really need question who we think we are. If those are not our values, what are? And if they are our values, why don’t we show it? Many

Jews are become crazily kosher on Pesakh; why won't they put the same kind of effort into putting their beliefs into practice the rest of the year?

Pesakh is a time to see ourselves as redeemed people. We eat a meal whose every symbol reminds us of coming out of Mitzrayim. Maybe this year we should redeem ourselves from the slavery of ease. If taking on the mitzvot at Sinai means anything, it means doing things with rigor, most noticeably in the sphere of food. Dedicating ourselves to keeping kosher is not easy, but redemption never is. We eat matzah this week because that is what we would offer before God on the altar. Making ourselves as priests in our own homes, as the privileged, chosen officiants in a divine drama, we recall our ancestors' liberation as our own. This year we are slaves of convenience; in the year just beginning, we pray for liberation to eat our way to the deeper values that the Exodus made us privy to. Shabbat shalom and hag samea'kh.