

“Torah On the Table:” A Sensual Morality

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“Is the pleasure we derive from eating morally valuable?” This paper answers an emphatic “Yes!”* Since Plato’s *Symposium*, the sensual pleasures of eating have been employed to provoke intellectual conversation and moral action. Early rabbinic tradition and subsequent Jewish interpretations and applications of it adopted this convention of Greco-Roman symposia in such institutions as Pharisaic table fellowship associations (*havurot*), the Passover *seder* rite, and the *Derekh Eretz* literature concerned with table etiquette.¹ Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher the 13th -14th century Spanish Jewish preacher, Biblical exegete, and kabbalist, summarized, synthesized, and re-interpreted these streams of rabbinic sympotic traditions about table talk and table ethics – “torah on the table” - in an elegant little handbook, *Shulhan Shel Arba* [*The Four-Legged Table*]. In it, he laid the foundation for a sort of theological gastronomy, which idealized the fusion of the physical pleasures of eating and the spiritual pleasures of conversation and religious insight as the highest form of service to God. Rabbenu Bahya thus offers us a noteworthy example of a religious case for the moral value of the pleasures of the table.

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¹ Daniel Sperber, *A Commentary on Derech Eretz Zuta. [2], Chapters Five to Eight* (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990); Siegfried Stein, "The Influence of Symposia Literature on the Literary Form of the Pesah Haggadah," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 8:1-2 (1957), 13-44; Ze'ev Gries, *Sifrut Ha-Hanhagot: Toldoteha u-Mekomah be-Haye Haside R. Yisrael Ba'Al Shem-Tov* (Yerushalayim: Mosad Byalik, 1989), 18-22; Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, "Meals as Midrash: A Survey of Ancient Meals in Jewish Studies Scholarship" in *Food and Judaism*, eds. Leonard J. Greenspoon, Ronald Simkins and Gerald Shapiro, Vol. 15 (Omaha, NE; Lincoln, NE: Creighton University Press; distributed by the University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 300-302.

While my paper focuses primarily on Rabbenu Bahya's case for the moral value of the pleasures of dining, I will also show how his ideas are similar to those in more modern, humanistic texts of gastronomy, indeed to such iconic gastronomic works as Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's *Physiology of Taste*, Isak Dinesen's "Babette's Feast," as well as Michael Pollan's currently influential book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. Perhaps it is not totally coincidental, since they too are the heirs of the same Greco-Roman heritage of sympotic conviviality, albeit through a different chain of tradition.

While these four gastronomes share the view that the sensual pleasures of the table have moral value and that the conversations at the table play a crucial role in connecting the experiences to moral action, they have been chosen for the variety of views they assumed their audiences had about the relationship between pleasure and morality. I remember when the topic of "Food and Morality" was announced at the Symposium two years ago, there was a palpable groan among some participants whom I suspect were certain that surest way to kill the pleasures of the table was to moralize. Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher had no such qualms. As a mystic and Aristotelian, he was quite certain that the pleasures of the table were a gift of God and part of our natural human constitution, and therefore must be consistent with the moral and theological purpose, *telos*, for which human beings were created. Later, Brillat-Savarin, a product of the French Enlightenment, had little need to reconcile the physical pleasures of the table with religious morality, since in his day traditional religion had fallen into disfavor; the religion of reason ruled. On the other hand, "Babette's Feast," which Karen Blixen as Isak Dinesen first published in the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1950, played with the assumption that pious religious morality and the sensual pleasures of the gourmet table

were diametrically opposed.² But the moral of her story is that true gastronomic artistry can reconcile the two. Finally, Michael Pollan represents a contemporary perspective akin to those seeking alternatives to traditional organized religions and what is perceived as their authoritarian morality. In the *Omnivore's Dilemma* Pollan tries to persuade his readers to do what is morally right - producing and consuming food that is ecologically and economically sustainable – because it tastes better!³ The sensual pleasures of the sustainable table themselves sustain a non-authoritarian morality, the ethical dimension of new secular alternatives to organized religion – e.g., the environmentalist, “Slow Food,” local food, and organic food movements. But as different as their audiences’ assumptions about the compatibility of food and morality may be, all suggest that moral awareness is conveyed in the stories we tell about matters of the table at the table. Thus, I will show how Rabbenu Bahya’s medieval religious Jewish handbook on eating anticipates the more modern secular expressions of the idea that *stories and talk about dinner over the dinner table* (“Torah on the table” as the rabbis put it) not only enhance our sensual enjoyment of the meal, but also connect and channel those pleasurable experiences into an impetus to moral action.⁴

² Jean Schuler, "Kierkegaard at Babette's Feast: The Return to the Finite," *Journal of Religion and Film* 1, no. 2 (1997): par. 2., <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/kierkega.htm>.

³ See especially now his new book *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

⁴ Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, "Shulhan Shel Arba" In *Kitve Rabenu Bahya*, ed. Charles Ber Chavel, 1969), 453-514; Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste, Or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, trans. M. F. K. Fisher (Washington, D.C: Counterpoint Press, 1999).; Isak Dinesen, "Babette's Feast " In *Anecdotes of Destiny ; and, Ehrengard* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 21-59; Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 450.; Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, "Meat-Eating and Jewish Identity; Ritualization of the Priestly Torah of Beast and Fowl (Lev 11:46) in Rabbinic Judaism and Medieval Kabbalah," *AJS Review* 24, no. 2 (1999), 227-262; "The Ritualization of Scripture in

Let me first make clear what I mean by “pleasure.” Since we are referring here primarily to the pleasures of the dinner table, it makes sense to turn to a definition and important distinction made by the father of modern Western gastronomy, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. In *The Physiology of Taste*, he distinguishes “the pleasures of the table...from the pleasure of eating, *their necessary antecedent*,” as follows:

The pleasure of eating is the actual and direct sensation of satisfying a need.

The pleasures of the table are a reflective sensation which is born from the various circumstances of place, time, things, and people who make up the surroundings of the meal.

The pleasure of eating is one we share with animals; it depends solely on hunger and what is needed to satisfy it.

The pleasures of the table are known only to the human race; they depend on careful preparations for the serving of the meal, on the choice of place, and the thoughtful assembling of the guests.

The pleasure of eating demands appetite, if not actual hunger; the pleasures of the table are most often independent of either one or the other...⁵

During the first course, and at the beginning of the feast, everyone eats hungrily, without talking, without paying any attention to what may be going on about him, and no matter what his position or rank may be he ignores everything in order to devote himself to the great task at hand. But as these needs are satisfied, the intellect rouses itself, conversation begins, a new order of behavior asserts itself, and the man who was no more than

Rabbenu Bahya's *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, " *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 13 (2001): 1-17; "Real Eating: A Medieval Spanish Jewish View of Gastronomic Authenticity" in *Authenticity in the Kitchen : Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery*, ed. Richard Hosking (Totnes: Prospect Books, 2006), 119-131.

⁵ Or as Arthur Machen translates, “more often than not,” in Brillat-Savarin and Arthur Machen, *The Physiology of Taste, Or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy* [Physiologie du goût.] (New York, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1960), 133, as cited by Leon Kass, *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of our Nature* (New York/Toronto: Free Press/ Maxwell Macmillan Canada (1994), 134. In any case, Brillat-Savarin means that pleasures of the table are independent of appetite and hunger, not from the pleasure of eating, which comes from satisfying one’s physical appetite and hunger. There is even less ambiguity when he says that four necessary conditions for pleasures of the table are “food at least passable, good wine, agreeable companions, and enough time.”(*Physiology of Taste*, 184).

an eater until then becomes a more or less pleasant companion, according to his natural ability.⁶

I will focus primarily on the moral value of the second type, “the pleasures of the table,” though it is quite clear that the pleasures of the table are impossible without the pleasure of eating, and that they naturally follow after it, as the last paragraph of this definition suggests. The pleasures of the table inextricably combine physical and spiritual experiences. As Brillat-Savarin goes on to say,

[A]t the end of a well-savored meal both soul and body enjoy a special well-being. Physically, at the same time that a diner’s brain awakens, his face grows animated, his color heightens, his eyes shine, and a gentle warmth creeps over his whole body. Morally, his spirit grows more perceptive, and clever phrases fly to his lips.⁷

This underlines two more crucial points. First, the pleasures of the table start from the sensual experience of the meal: the tastes, smells, sights, touches, and sounds one has in the company of their table companions. Secondly, it is *the talk* over the table prompted by those experiences that rouses the intellect and connects the sensory pleasures of the table to a moral sensibility. All of the savants of the dinner table I discuss here emphasize both of these points in one way or another.

This conceit of words about the table over the table was something with which Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher was quite taken. His wit, psychological insight, and high estimation of the pleasures of the table tempt me to describe him as a sort of medieval Jewish Brillat-Savarin (though his handbook of mystical eating etiquette, *Shulhan Shel*

⁶ Ibid., 182. Kass, *The Hungry Soul*, 134, cites this passage favorably to emphasize that there is a uniquely human way of satisfying our natural hunger, which distinguishes us from other animals.

⁷ Brillat-Savarin, *Physiology of Taste*, 183.

Arba, is more a theology than a physiology of taste) He knew it in the form of one my favorite passages in the classic text of rabbinic Judaism, the Talmud:

Rabbi Simeon said: If three have eaten at one table and have not spoken over it words of the Torah, it is as though they had eaten of the sacrifices of the dead, for it is written (Isaiah 28:8) “For all tables are full of vomit, no place is without filthiness.” But if three have eaten at one table and have spoken over it words of the Torah, it is as if they had eaten from the table of God, for it is written (Ezekiel 41.22) “He said to me, ‘This is the table which is before the LORD.’” (m. Avot 3:3)

Rabbenu Bahya took this earlier tradition to mean that his circle of fellow mystics and rabbinic scholars should pepper their conversations at the dinner table with certain key passages from the Torah that talked directly or indirectly about eating, i.e., the pleasures of the table.⁸ With his little handbook by their side at the table to provide talking points, Rabbenu Bahya advised his companions (and many other Jews in subsequent generations) literally to speak “words of Torah on – that is, about, the table – on, that is, physically over the table.”⁹ Why? Because in Rabbenu Bahya’s view, the pleasures of the meal, eaten with the proper intent, that is by saying “right words” can become the occasion of an ecstatic divine revelation, a visionary experience, equivalent to the visionary experience of the elders of the Israelites at Mount Sinai, who according to scripture, “saw God and they ate and drank” (Ex 24:11) – the authentic “real eating” about which I spoke at the 2005 Oxford Symposium.¹⁰

⁸ Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, 474.

⁹ Ibid., 460. The Hebrew word ‘*al*’ in the expression “*divre Torah al ha-shulhan*” from m. Avot 3:3 can have this double meaning, especially in the playful way the rabbis interpreted their texts.

¹⁰ Ibid., 492-3; Brumberg-Kraus, “Real Eating,” 119-131. The relatively numerous extant manuscripts and printed editions of *Shulhan Shel Arba* attest to its popularity, especially among Eastern European Hasidim, well beyond Rabbenu Bahya’s elite circle of Spanish kabbalists. See Chavel’s introductory comments in Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, *Kitve Rabenu Bahya*, ed. Charles Ber Chavel (Yerushalayim: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1969), 456.

The moral significance of the this-worldly and otherworldly pleasures of Rabbenu Bahya's "four-legged table" is that they are the cause, means, and reward for human beings to be what they were created for, to perform God's will that He revealed in the Torah. He says,

the choicest of enjoyments, the pleasures of food were created only for the sake of the Torah, and for this reason they said in the Chapters of the Fathers: "If there is no choice flour, there is no Torah, and if no Torah, no choice flour" (m. Avot 3:17), that is to say, there would be no pleasures of food.¹¹

Rabbenu Bahya means several things by this. First, as Brillat-Savarin later concurs, the spiritual pleasures of the table cannot occur until your physical hunger for food is satisfied; you cannot be engaged in Torah, at least not on a regular basis, on an empty stomach. In that sense, *kemah*, which I translated as "choice flour" is just a synonym for food in general. But *kemah*'s literal meaning as finely ground flour, suggest that it's not just any food, but only the finest, more delicate foods, e.g., "wine and fragrant foods," and small poultry, that sharpen and purify the intellect "for the soul to be lifted up and develop the aptitude to receive the Torah," rather than beef, barley, and onions, "coarse foods" typical of the diet of those with a coarseness of intellect."¹² Joel Hecker aptly called the former "brain foods" in his discussion of similar ideas in the Zohar.¹³ Thirdly, Rabbenu Bahya interprets the converse, "no choice flour, if no Torah," to mean that the quantities, types, and occasions to eat foods that the Torah prescribes become occasions to know God better, since they indicate how God sustains the world.¹⁴ It's precisely the

¹¹ Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, 496.

¹² *Ibid.*, 496.

¹³ Joel Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 282.

¹⁴ Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, 496-7.

knowledge of Torah that enables a person to turn even “coarse” food like beef into something finer, that is, through the process of digestion only a Torah scholar can raise the animal soul of the beef he eats to a higher status nearer to God, through a sort of gastronomic metempsychosis.¹⁵ The *words of Torah* about the table over the table direct the Torah scholars’ minds to divine origin and messianic perfection of the foods they are presently eating (and the joys they are experiencing as they eat). This in effect transforms both themselves and their food (via the combustion-like process of their digestion) into something like the sacrificial fires on the altar of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, which raise their material forms into something more ethereal and closer to God in heaven, “a pleasing odor before the Lord.”¹⁶ This process underlies the final point Rabbenu Bahya makes about the parallelism of the phrase in m. Avot 3:17, namely, if there is no food for the body (flour) there is no food for the soul (Torah), and if no food for the soul (Torah), no food for the body (flour) – *both* must have their due. Real eating is a fusion of body and soul pleasures toward their moral end, for “the powers of the soul are invisible and are actualized only through the body.”¹⁷ This is why Rabbenu Bahya is so insistent in the 4th Gate of his book that the messianic banquet reserved for the righteous in the world to come will be a real material meal of the flesh of Leviathan, Behemoth, and Bar Yochnai, and not a just a metaphor as some of the medieval philosophers took the rabbinic

¹⁵ Ibid., 496.

¹⁶ This interpretation turns on the similarity of Hebrew words for man (*ish*), fire (*esh*), and “My sacrificial fire” or “My sacrificial fire offering” (*ishi*):

And from this understand the matter of the sacrifices, which are the hidden things of the Torah, about which it is written: ‘to My [offering by] fire, my pleasing odor’ [Nu 28:2]. The power of the higher soul increases and is added to by the fire offerings in the eating of the sacrifices, and so our rabbis said;¹⁶ ‘My sacrifice, My bread, to My [offering by] fire.’ ... to My fire you give it, i.e., “My man,” the Torah scholar, *ibid.*, 492.

¹⁷ Ibid., 492.

descriptions of this eschatological banquet to be. Even at the end of time, the soul can be perfected enough to have the capacity to see God only after the body is restored by this meal to its original immortal, perfect stature.¹⁸ Thus Rabbenu Bahya asserts that eating and its concomitant, fused corporeal and psychic pleasures has moral value as the highest form of worship of God:

See how one's eating is considered a perfect act of worship like one of the forms of the divine sacrifices, as the quintessential commandment. And this is the point of having the right intention at a meal at the table – that the body be nourished by it and take its bodily portion from the bodily eating, and the soul by this act of thought *is filled, fed, and satisfied as if from the choicest parts of real eating* of the ways of Ha-Shem and His *pleasantness*, and regarding this it is said, 'Your table is laid out with rich food.' (Job 36:16)¹⁹

This understanding of pleasure may also help clear up a significant modern misconception about religious faith. Many assume that religious faith is non-empirically based, but primarily on “things unseen.” Therefore, it can be easily dismissed as irrational. Not so Jewish faith (and most others I suspect as well). Rabbenu Bahya employs a wonderful metaphor to make this point. Interpreting a peculiar Talmudic phrase, the “three-legged table,” he asks, why a three-legged table when people ordinarily eat on a table of four legs? Because it hints at the fourth leg, which is invisible – the divine Reality behind the tangible ones we know through our senses.²⁰ Hence, the title of Rabbenu Bahya's book, “*The Four-Legged Table*.” What's striking is the proportion of the visible to the invisible, 3:1! True faith is firmly rooted in the empirical experiences of

¹⁸ Ibid., 504. According to rabbinic tradition, Adam and Eve's original physical stature in the Garden of Eden was dramatically diminished as a consequence of their eating of the forbidden fruit, *ibid.*, 458.

¹⁹ Ibid., 497.

²⁰ Ibid., 461.

our senses, which the sensual pleasures of the table exemplify, and point to the graciousness and wisdom of God, and our moral obligation of gratitude.

Now we leave the medieval world of the Jewish mystics and turn to our examples of more modern, secular gourmands and gastronomes, and their views on the moral value of the pleasures of the table. First we return to Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, who in *The Physiology of Taste* (1826) reiterates the importance of conversation for mediating the moral benefits of the pleasures of the table, in particular for encouraging harmonious social relations:

Gourmandism is one of the most important influences in our social life; it gradually spreads that spirit of conviviality which brings together from day to day differing kinds of people, melts them into a whole, animates their conversation, and softens the sharp corners of the conventional inequalities of position and breeding.

It is gourmandism, too, which motivates the effort any host must make to take good care of his guests, as well as their own gratitude when they perceive that he has employed all his knowledge and tact to please them; and it is fitting at this very place to point out with scorn those stupid diners who gulp down in disgraceful indifference the most nobly prepared dishes, or who inhale with impious inattention the bouquet of a limpid nectar.

General rule. Any preparation which springs from a high intelligence demands explicit praise, and a tactful expression of appreciation must always be made whenever it is plain that there is any attempt to please.²¹

Here, Brillat-Savarin's humanistic Enlightenment perspective comes to the fore, since pleasure encourages gratitude to one's fellow human beings, rather than God.

Gourmandism not only promotes excellent social values, but does so in the form of appropriate speech by intelligent appreciative people at the dinner table. I like his witty example of how the pleasures of the table promote good marriages, since in Brillat-Savarin's view,

²¹ Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*, 153.

A married couple who enjoy the pleasures of the table have, at least once a day, a pleasant opportunity to be together; for even those who do not sleep in the same bed (and there are many such) at least eat the same table; they have a subject of conversation which is ever new, they can talk not only of what they are eating, but also of what they have eaten, what they will eat, and what they have notices at other tables; they can discuss fashionable dishes, new recipes, and so on and so on; and of course, it is well known that intimate table talk [CHITCHAT] is full of its own charm.²²

Though a bachelor, he appreciated the importance of the pleasures of table talk as glue that holds society together. If in his ideal table conversations, you didn't "see God," as Rabbenu Bahya' promised in his, Brillat-Savarin believed you could truly see one another and appreciated their company, his humanistic equivalent to the experience of divine revelation.

In Isak Dineson's classic of gastronomic fiction, and the basis for the movie of the same name, *Babette's Feast*, we have a more explicit claim that the sensual pleasures of the table at a truly great meal enables its participants to "see God," despite pious fears to the contrary.²³ Particularly striking is the contrast the story sets up between silence and speech at the table of "Babette's feast." The elder members of the community, torn between their horror that the sensual pleasures of the sumptuous meal Babette prepared for them would drive them straight to hell, and their gratitude for all she had done for them in their soup kitchen, and now for them on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the preacher who founded their community,

"promised one another that... they would, on the great day, be silent upon all matters of food and drink. Nothing that might be set before them, be it frogs or snails, should wring a word from their lips.

"Even so," said a white-bearded Brother, "The tongue is a little member and boasteth great things. The tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full

²² Ibid.

²³ Dineson, *Babette's Feast*, 21-59; *Babette's Feast*, directed by Gabriel Axel (New York, N.Y.: Orion Home Video, 1989).

of deadly poison. On the day of our master we will cleanse our tongues of all taste and purify them of all delight or disgust of the senses, keeping and preserving them for the higher things of praise and thanksgiving.”²⁴

But the meal had quite a different effect on the tongue of the one guest who had not been a party to their covenant, General Loewenhielm, a sort of prodigal son figure who, now a real man of the world, at long last had returned home to the small village of his birth. As the unaccustomed wine was served to his solemn, silent table companions and him,

General Loewenhielm, took a sip of it, startled, raised the glass first to his nose and then to his eyes, and sat down bewildered. ‘This is very strange!’ he thought. ‘Amontillado! And the finest Amontillado that I have ever tasted.’ After a moment, in order to test his senses, he took a small spoonful of his soup, took a second spoonful and laid down his spoon. ‘This is exceedingly strange!’ he said to himself. ‘For surely I am eating turtle soup – and what turtle soup!’ He was seized by a queer kind of panic and emptied his glass.

Usually in Berlevaag people did not speak much while they were eating. But somehow this evening tongues had been loosened. An old brother told the story of his first meeting with the Dean. Another went through that sermon which sixty years ago had brought about his conversion. An aged woman, the one to whom Martine had first confided her distress [about the meal], reminded her friends how in all afflictions, any Brother or Sister was ready to share the burden of any other.

General Loewenhielm, who was to dominate the conversation of the dinner table, related how the Dean’s collection of sermons was a favorite of the Queen’s. But as a new dish was served he was silenced. ‘Incredible!’ he told himself. ‘It is Blinis Demidoff!’ He looked round at his fellow diners. They were all quietly eating their blinis Demidoff without any sign of either surprise or approval, as if they had been doing so every day for thirty years. A Sister on the other side of the table opened on the subject of the strange happenings which had taken place while the Dean was still amongst his children, and which one might venture to call miracles.²⁵

And so the conversation went, until it culminated in a marvelous speech by the General, pointing to this meal as a striking manifestation of grace, beginning and ending with the beautiful image of harmony and reconciliation in an allusion to Psalm 85 in Scripture:

²⁴ Dinesen, *Babette's Feast*, 41.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

“Mercy and Truth, my friends, have met together...Righteousness and Bliss shall kiss one another.” Though his table companions didn’t understand everything he said, the effect of “his collected and inspired face and *the sound of well-known and cherished words had seized and moved all hearts.*”²⁶ Here, the combination of inspired food, inspired speech, and a long, complex shared history of the meal’s participants seemed to have turned Babette’s Feast into a joyously moral lesson about the power of grace. The pleasures of Babette’s Feast repaired all the broken pieces of the world of the characters of Dinesen’s story: the quarreling members of the community, the unrequited love between the pious sisters and their frustrated, more worldly suitors, the artists denied by fate the chance to practice their art, the living separated from their sorely missed dead, the presumably insurmountable chasm between the pleasures of the body and the pleasures of the soul. The talk prompted by Babette’s remarkable feast reconnected its participants to one another and to the complex world.

Finally, we turn to Michael Pollan’s observation about the power of words and the experience of grace that he makes at the end of his recent book, the *Omnivore’s Dilemma* on the occasion of the “sustainable” banquet he holds for the friends who helped him bring it about:

We plated the pasta, and I called everyone to the table for dinner. Votive candles were lit, wine was poured, the perfume of thyme and morels filled the room, and I raided my glass for a toast. I’d actually meant to write out something earlier in the day, because I had wanted to organize my thoughts on the meaning of the meal and everybody’s contribution to it, but the day had gotten away from me. So I kept it simple. I went around the table and spoke of each person’s contribution to my foraging education and to this meal that, though I cooked most of it, was in the deepest sense our collaboration...

I had actually wanted to say something more, to express a wider gratitude for the meal we were about to eat, but I was afraid that to offer words of thanks

²⁶ Ibid., 53.

for the pig and the mushrooms and the forests and the garden would come off sounding corny and, worse, might ruin some appetites. The words I was reaching for, of course were the words of grace. But as the conversation at the table unfurled like a sail amid the happy clatter of silver, tacking from stories of hunting to motherlodes of mushrooms to abalone adventures, I realized that in this particular case words of grace were unnecessary...

As you might expect from this crowd and occasion, the talk at the table was mainly about food. Yet this was not the usual food talk you hear nowadays; less about recipes and restaurants, it revolved around specific plants and animals and fungi, the places where they lived. The stories told by this little band of foragers ventured a long way from the table, the words (the tastes, too) recalling us to an oak forest in Sonoma, to a pine burn in the Sierra Nevada, to the stinky salt flats of San Francisco Bay, to slippery boulders on the Pacific coast, and to a backyard in Berkeley. The stories, like the food that fed them, cast lines of relation to all these places and the creatures living (and dying) in them, drawing them all together on this table, on these plates, in what to me began to feel a little like a ceremony. And there's sense in which the meal had become just that, a thanksgiving or a secular seder, for every item on our plates pointed somewhere else, almost sacramentally, tell a little story about nature or community or even the sacred, for mystery was very often the theme. Such storied food can feed us both body and soul, the threads of narrative knitting us together as a group, and knitting the group into the larger fabric of the given world.²⁷

The stories he and his guests tell link the food part to the whole, cosmic, ecological picture. Good food and good conversation made Michael Pollan's meal a "sacred," "sacramental" or "mysterious" experience. The moral value of the pleasures of the table is precisely in the power of

storied food [to] feed us both body and soul, the threads of narrative knitting us together as a group, and knitting the group into the larger fabric of the given world.²⁸

Pollan's "words" and "the tastes, too," Dinesen's "sound of well-known and cherished words" at Babette's feast, and Brillat-Savarin's "spirit of conviviality which brings together ... differing kinds of people, melts them into a whole, [and] animates their conversation" are not so far from Rabbenu Bahya's call for "words about the table over

²⁷ Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 406-408.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 408.

the table.” All unite the pleasures of the table into a single experience that is both sensual and intellectual, enabling diners to both feel and know their connectedness to the people and natural world around them – seen and unseen. So we need both “the table and the words of Torah over the table,” because as the Zohar says, “Blessing does not rest on an empty place.”²⁹ Thus Rabbenu Bahya recommended the practice not only to say blessings over food before eating, but also to keep crumbs of food on table after eating for grace after meals, to draw down blessing. For only God creates something from nothing: we must create something from something.³⁰ There has to be something there, to which we are attached body and soul, some thing so good for us we can taste it, if we are to be moved to moral action. That is why the demonstrative is so important in our rituals of dinner. It “cast[s] lines of relation” from what we are enjoying directly to the broader web of human and natural connections in our stories that demand a moral response -- *this* is table of the Lord; *this* is my body, my blood; *this* is the wine and quail I tasted so many years ago in Paris before the war; *these* are the truffles we hunted for and picked ourselves, and the boar I hunted and caught: *these* eggs were from free-range chickens fed only on organic foods without growth hormones; *this* soup and salad is from the greens we planted and picked ourselves at our local CSA. Can the pleasures of good eating and good company get us to do the moral good? Speech-cued, mindful acts of eating, which, according to all four of our gastronomes, fuse the pleasures of the body and soul, indeed seem to give us the impetus to act morally.

²⁹ Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals*, 145-146.

³⁰ Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, 477; Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals*, 148-149.

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