

Kabbalah, Food and Sustainability
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Classic Jewish Kabbalah tends to view the interactions and exchanges between the divine and human worlds as a sort of “cosmic re-cycling,” particularly in its transformation of the traditional language of the Biblical sacrificial system. Kabbalistic meal rituals evoke these metaphors to heighten the intensity of the experience of the physical activity of eating. They cast the eater as a crucial player in the mythic drama of cosmic re-cycling. The spiritual experience of the fusion of body and soul advocated by Jewish religious mystics in speech-cued, mindful acts of eating is not so far from the experience of the sustainable banquet Michael Pollan prepared for his friends, the celebratory “thanksgiving” or “secular seder” which he describes at the end of his book *the Omnivore’s Dilemma*.¹ Both channel the “psychosomatic” experience of mindful eating (to use Joel Hecker’s term)² into a predisposition for environmentally conscious moral action, by way of mythic stories and metaphors of connectedness between people, and between people and nature.

But while Michael Pollan makes a compelling case for telling stories to motivate us to eat, shop, farm, forage, hunt, cook, and work with our fellow species more mindfully in ways that are environmentally sustainable, the most frequently quoted “rabbi” at this conference on Jewish environmentalism³ overlooks some valuable resources from his own Jewish tradition. Pollan beautifully evokes how “storied food” fed him and his guests physically and spiritually at the final sustainable banquet he describes at the end of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*:

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¹ Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 406-8.

² Joel Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 59-60.

³ As Nigel Savage, the Executive Director of Hazon, quipped at the conclusion of the Klutznick-Harris Symposium on Jews and the Environment, 10/29/07.

a thanksgiving or a *secular seder*, [in which] every item on our plates pointed somewhere else, almost sacramentally, tell[ing] 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.⁴

Yet for me, conspicuously absent were the *Jewish* chapters in Pollan's "narrative knitting us together as a group...into the larger fabric of the world" despite the fact that our own Jewish narratives are quite adept at this sort of thing, like in the first chapter of Genesis, for example.⁵

Why? Certainly Pollan acknowledges and refers to his Jewish background on several occasions in the book, and has spoken elsewhere about Jewish connections in his work, for example in an interview in *The Jew and the Carrot*.⁶ But his references to Judaism and Jewish tradition seem to reflect both some alienation and ambivalence. Thus, in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan says,

Healthy and virtuous as I many feel these days, *I also feel alienated from traditions I value: cultural traditions like the Thanksgiving turkey, or even franks at the ballpark, and family traditions like my mother's beef brisket at Passover.*⁷

But in the very next sentence he qualifies this by saying these very "ritual meals link us to our history along multiple lines- family, religion, landscape, nation and, if you want to go back much further, biology."⁸ Maybe they can, but to Pollan, the old ways no longer seem to *do* that, for him. Pollan looks back wistfully to a lost past when "religion and ritual...played a crucial part in the process [of meat-eating]," when for "Native Americans [,]...other hunter-gatherers [and]...in biblical *time* rules governing ritual slaughter" encouraged a heightened sensitivity and appreciation

⁴ Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 407-408.

⁵ See for example Ellen Bernstein, *The Splendor of Creation: A Biblical Ecology* (Cleveland, Ohio : Pilgrim Press, 2005).

⁶ Leah Koenig, "The View from Your Fork: An Interview with Michael Pollan," *The Jew and the Carrot*, <http://jcarrot.org/the-view-from-your-fork-an-interview-with-michael-pollan/> (accessed September 12, 2008).

⁷ Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 314.

⁸ *ibid.*, 314

for the moral costs of eating meat.⁹ Nowadays we have totally desacralized the process. In the past, *priests* offered animals to the *gods (or God)*. But today, in contrast, Pollan exclaims “Priests! Now we give the job to migrant workers paid the minimum wage.”¹⁰ Especially jarring to my *Jewish* environmentalist perspective is Pollan’s choice of wild boar as the main course of his otherwise remarkably moving final sustainable banquet that he arranged for his friends, which he described at the end of his book. Why *davka* a pig? Those same priests upon whom Pollan looks back nostalgically for a more sacralized understanding of their relationship to the animals they slaughtered for food, distinguished between animals that were fit or unfit for sacrifice. And wild boars were not and are still not *kosher*. Yet, in light of the very unsustainable, even horrific standard practices for the “industrial” processing of animals for meat that Pollan himself and others have documented, I can empathize with Jews who feel that mindful eating of free range, organically-fed, and otherwise sustainably raised animals may be more in keeping with the ethical and spiritual purpose behind the Jewish dietary laws, regardless of whether or not they are among the animals permitted in Leviticus 11 and slaughtered and kashered by a *shokhet*. How much the more so when the major *kosher* processing plants, e.g., Agriprocessors in Postville, IA, appear to be guilty of legal and ethical violations, and when the Orthodox Union seems reluctant to withhold kosher certification because it says it can only evaluate ritual fitness, not the ethics of Agriprocessors’ business practices.¹¹ Hence, Ben Murane, a frequent contributor to the “New Jewish Food Movement web site, the *Jew and the Carrot* posts about his ambivalence toward kashrut,

⁹ *ibid.*, 331.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 331.

¹¹ Though on 9/9/08, in anticipation of over 9000 legal charges filed by the Iowa Attorney General’s office against Agriprocessors for child labor violations, the Orthodox Union announced it might withdraw its kosher certification (Julia Preston, “Meatpacker may Lose Kosher Certification,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2008).

Other days, I hear from God that it's not a time to get bogged down with the inanity of laws which selfishly benefit my own personal sense of spirituality but don't accomplish worldly good for other people — and thus, I must use the subways, computers, non-hekhshered food to accomplish some aggadic (broadly ethical) end.¹²

Does one have to choose between keeping kosher and eating ethically, spiritually, and sustainably?

Part of the problem is that the laws of kashrut by themselves cannot assure both an environment that is sustainable and the just treatment of its inhabitants. We need to turn to additional sources for Jewish values on food to address the issues of environmental sustainability and justice, such as the ethos of the ancient Biblical sacrificial system, and its later transformations in post-Biblical rabbinic kabbalistic thought. But how is it possible to draw from this ancient Jewish ethos in a compelling way, beyond Pollan's nostalgia for old cultural traditions, which addresses the ethical, environmental, and spiritual concerns contemporary Jews like Pollan and his "disciples" (among whom I count myself) have? I think kabbalah's proven power to adapt the symbols and moral ethos of the sacrificial Biblical sacrifices to the dinner table when the Temple no longer exists is particularly relevant for Jewish environmentalists today.

Kabbalah offers great insight into how rituals have the power to make the connections to move people to action. In particular, the food rituals inspired by kabbalah can effectively connect stories, experiences, and actions purposefully. For it's the interweaving of our personal stories, the metaphors of our traditional Jewish stories, and the biological, economic, political, and ecological stories like the ones Pollan tells, that weave the lines of connection so crucial to an environmentalist perspective. Kabbalistic meal rituals, which connect stories about the sacred to the food on the plates in front of us, work very much like the "ceremonial" banquet Pollan conducted at the end of his book, in which

¹² Ben Murane, "Kashrut has no God - but Shouldn't it?" *The Jew and the Carrot* (2008), <http://jcarrot.org/kashrut-has-no-god-but-shouldnt-it/>, accessed 9/15/08.

[t]he 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... [so that] every item on our plates pointed somewhere else, almost sacramentally, [told] a little story about nature or community or even the sacred.¹³

While Pollan clearly demonstrates an intuitive grasp of how ritual and story work in sync, ritual competence is an art, and the kabbalists were masters in the art of ritual. Why reinvent the wheel, when the most gifted kabbalists have provided us with evocative myths and rituals of connectedness that I believe can heighten the experiences Pollan describes.

The kabbalah of the *Zohar* and its circle that emerged in 13th-14th century Spain abounds in powerful, imaginatively stimulating metaphors of connection and in mindful eating practices. If as Pollan argues, our enjoyment of environmentally insensitive “industrial food” is predicated on *not knowing* where it comes from, the eating metaphors of kabbalah stress the opposite: *eating is knowing*. This is a point R. Bahya articulates in many different ways in his kabbalistic manual of eating practices, *Shulhan Shel Arba* (“*The Four-Legged Table*”). According, R. Bahya, eating can be a visionary experience, “real eating,” (*akhilah vada’it*), a re-enactment of the visionary experience of the elders and nobility of Israel who at Mt. Sinai “envisioned God and ate and drank.” (Ex 24:11). In R. Bahya’s midrash, based on earlier rabbinic traditions, these activities were not sequential, but simultaneous. And the peculiar word choice of *va-yehezu* “they envisioned” rather than simply *va-yir’u* “they saw,” means the elders had a *hazon*, a “prophetic vision.”¹⁴ Or it’s like the vision of Moses himself, who didn’t really fast for forty days but rather was sustained by “real eating,” that is, he was fed by the light of the Shekhinah. R. Bahya plays on the pun of *hazon* with a *het* (“vision”) and *ha-zan* with a *hay* (“Who feeds”), as in the phrase from the grace after meals,

¹³ Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 407-408.

¹⁴ Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, "Shulhan Shel Arba" In *Kitve Rabenu Bahya*, ed. Charles Ber Chavel, 1969, 492-3.

“*ha-zan et ha-olam kulo bi-tuvo*” (“Who feeds the whole world with his goodness...”), i.e., God. Is it coincidence that one of the leading voices of contemporary Jewish environmentalism, and the sponsor of the web blog *The Jew and the Carrot* (“the homepage for the New Jewish Food Movement, with a focus on health and sustainability”) calls itself “Hazon”?¹⁵ What makes “real eating” a visionary experience is the simultaneous eating and focusing intellectually upon the source from where your food comes. The story of the manna in the wilderness, another example of “real eating” according to R. Bahya, teaches this. The very name of this food, “*man*” is itself a prompt to look into its origins, “when the people saw it, they said ‘what is it?’ (*man hu*).¹⁶ The instructions about collecting it also link it to the story of creation in Genesis. One was to gather the manna the first six days of the week, but not on the seventh day, in recognition of the Sabbath God established. Instead, on the sixth day, the Israelites were to gather a double portion, which the custom of two *hallot* on the Sabbath table that Jews still practice today commemorates. Disobeying the prohibition from gathering the manna on the Sabbath came with negative consequences; the manna was spoiled and inedible – a milder echo of the consequences when Adam and Eve violated of God’s first food prohibition. The point of this story for R. Bahya is that everything about the manna: its name, its miraculous qualities, the rules governing its “harvest” and consumption – taught the Israelites of its connection to the whole, to God. As Moses said to the Israelites when they asked one “What is it?”: “*This* is the bread which the Lord has given to you to eat.”¹⁷ The Torah tells a story about “real eating” that is both a physical act of eating and an intellectual act of knowing fused into one. But how can stories like this, about distant, mythic times, people, and places - have anything thing to do

¹⁵ "Hazon," <http://www.hazon.org/> (accessed 9/15, 2008): “The word hazon is Hebrew for ‘vision.’ Our vision is to create a healthier and more sustainable Jewish community -- as a step towards a healthier and more sustainable world for all.”

¹⁶ Ex 16:15.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

with the sustainable, whole wheat loaves of bread, ethically slaughtered organic chickens, and greens from my CSA on my plate in front of me today?

Kabbalists like R. Bahya b. Asher developed a program of ritual practice for meals that combined Torah table talk and traditional rabbinic meal practices (blessings before and after meals, hand-washing, table manners [*“derekh eretz”*], etc.) to heighten the spiritual experience of eating. It’s what I call “eating Torah,” in every sense of the expression. Torah means both “a teaching” and an instruction about a specific ritual practice (as in “This is the *torah* of beast and fowl...” [Lev. 11:46], that is conveyed both verbally and experientially – a torah about eating attached to specific foods right before one’s eyes that one eats. This is torah about “the table” performed in thought and practice while at the table, as m. Avot 3:3 expresses it, “*divre torah al ha-shulhan*” (“words of torah about/over the table”). Thus R. Bahya recommended his book *Shulhan Shel Arba*, “be in the hand of any person on his table, that he should set it down by his right hand, and that it should be with him, and that he read in it all that is required at his meal” for appropriate talking points for dinner table conversation. As I have written elsewhere,

By saying Scriptural passages that convey these metaphors [for eating] *at the table*, R. Bahya encourages ... a sort of ‘directed free association.’ ... [I]t is free association in the sense that R. Bahya wants to prompt a chain of associations by speaking verses of Torah about the table over the table. The meal is not just a foretaste of the world to come, it is the past manna miracle, it is a taste of supernal light, it is Mt. Sinai, it is prophetic vision, it is what keeps us from being animals, it is divine service - it is all these things and more AT ONCE! It is directed, in the sense that it is all directed toward the same concrete experience of a communal meal. It is many “words of Torah” (*divrei Torah*) over one table. *Zeh ha-shulhan asher lifnay Adonai!* [*“This is the table before the Lord.”*] Self-conscious experiences of thinking aloud about Torah are fused with the concrete experiences of eating and drinking at the table.¹⁸

It’s especially through the demonstrative “*This!*” of statements like “*This is the table*

¹⁸ Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, “The Ritualization of Scripture in Rabbenu Bahya’s *Shulhan Shel Arba*,” *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 13 (2001), 16 (accessed July 7, 2005).

before the Lord (Ez 41:22; the first sentence and inspiration for the title of *Shulhan Shel Arba*) that connects the old stories and metaphors to the present. Just as in the more familiar ritual words said over the ritual foods of the Passover seder (*Pesah, matzah, maror*), we explicitly connect the words, metaphors, and stories of the past, to the food, company, and personal stories of the present - weaving lines of connection to the things we cannot see to these we *can* see, hear, and taste right here in the present!

A good particular example of this, that I think teaches an environmentally relevant lesson, is the kabbalistic ritual of leaving bread on the table (even after the meal is finished) when one recites *birkat ha-mazon*, the grace after meals.¹⁹ This is the physical, concrete “performance” of a saying from the *Zohar*: “a blessing does not rest on an empty place.”²⁰ This saying and ritual teach that human beings cannot create something from nothing.²¹ Only God can do that, and God did that only once with the creation of the world. Therefore when we consume something, we human beings are responsible for making sure that we don’t do it in such a way that there is nothing left to feed the rest of the world.²² For me, I can hardly hear “a blessing doesn’t rest on an empty place” without

¹⁹ Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, *Shulhan Shel Arba*, 477:

One must be careful when one is about to bless [after a meal] that there is bread left on the table, as they said in the tractate Sanhedrin: “Whoever does not leave bread on his table [when he is about to bless following a meal] Scripture says the following about him, ‘There was nothing left after he had eaten, His goodness will not take hold’” (Job 20:21) (b. Sanhedrin 92a). The reason for this practice is so that the blessing will rest upon that which remains; if nothing remains, the blessing has nothing to rest upon. (translation by Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals*, 148.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 145-6

²¹ *ibid.*, 149.

²² This is probably based on kabbalistic interpretations of the earlier rabbinic idea stated in the Talmud (*b. Berakhot* 35a) that for whoever eats food without saying a blessing, it is as if they committed sacrilege (*me’ilah*), as if they have stolen from the Temple. The kabbalists interpret this to mean that God sends a sort of divine energy flow into the food we eat to nourish us, but in eating it we diminish it. However, by reciting the appropriate blessing, we restore the divine energy flow and return it back up to heaven. But if we don’t bless, the universe suffers a net loss of divine energy. Hence whether through the Temple sacrifices before the destruction, or through blessings

thinking of the devastation of farmland and the depletion of soil nutrients brought about by the monoculture of a few commodity crops and over-reliance on artificial chemical fertilizers, not to mention the empty tables of those stricken with food shortages as a result of these short-sighted agricultural practices. These contemporary associations then inform my reading of the *Zohar* when it says,

“You shall make a table of acacia wood...” Exodus 25:23). This table is intended to be established in the tabernacle. *Blessing from above rests upon it and food proceeds from it to the entire world.* This table must not be empty for even a moment but rather there should [always] be food upon it because blessing does not rest upon an empty place...It is from that table that blessings and food proceed *to all other tables of the world* that are blessed because of it.²³

The *Zohar* evokes images of the Temple and of a world-feeding table to engage us in stories where we and the tables in our homes have roles to play in the cosmic drama of sustaining the whole world. In kabbalistic theory, this sort of imaginative visualization is crucial to the efficacy our actions on a cosmic level. Thus Joel Hecker explains the theory behind the ritual practice of leaving bread on the table when reciting the blessing after the meal:

The blessing will proceed to the table and its bread, provided that the right image of it is maintained, *in the imagination and available to the physical sense of vision as well.* The theurgic process, then entails two requirements: the physical act of retaining bread upon the table and retaining a particular image of the table *in the imaginative faculty.* Both, I surmise, are indispensable to effect the transfer of blessing from the upper realm to the lower...Success demands transparency between the physical reality and the idealized impress in the mind...²⁴

Whether one takes the stories about the cosmic lines of connection between us, God, and the sustenance of the world literally or figuratively, they have the power to stimulate the imagination. When we tell these stories while at the table, and pointedly, deliberately refer them to ourselves and what we are doing right now, the play of our imagination with the sensual experiences of the food

now, we participate in system of “cosmic recycling.” See Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, 488

²³ *Zohar* 2:153b translated in Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals*, 145-6, emphasis mine.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 146, emphasis mine.

and our companions effects an almost alchemical transformation. Pollan's "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" become so palpably real we can taste it. Only convictions that real are likely to commit us to the radical lifestyle changes we need to make for an environmentally sustainable future. Kabbalah offers us Jews some promising models for speaking words of environmental *torah* over the table.

The importance of conversations over food for galvanizing people to environmentalist and food activism already been commented upon by the farmer-journalist Tom Philpott in his interview with Michael Pollan about his new book *In Defense of Food*.²⁵

Sidney Mintz's definition of cuisine came down to conversation. For Mintz, Americans just didn't engage in passionate talk about food. Unlike the southwest French and their cassoulet, most Americans don't obsess and quarrel about what comprises, say, and authentic veggie burger.

But if cuisine comes down to talk, things are looking up a decade after Mintz cast his judgment. Now more and more people are buzzing about food; not only what's good to eat, but also, appropriately, for the land that invented MacDonaldis and Cheetos, about what's in our food, where it came from, how it's grown!²⁶

It's a similar kind of impassioned, embodied conversation that's going on in the "New Jewish Food Movement" about which Nigel Savage speaks, providing a fresh route for Jews into both Judaism and environmental activism.²⁷ I think the kabbalah traditions I discussed and many others like them have something very important to contribute to this conversation.

Michael Pollan suggests that if we weren't living in a "Fast Food Nation," we wouldn't need so much self-conscious food talk or sustainable banquets so hyper-conscious and labor intensive that we should only do them once or twice a year as "pure rituals." While in the past,

[f]or countless generations eating was something that took place in the steadying context of a family and a culture, ... the full consciousness of what was involved did not need to be rehearsed at every meal because it was stored away like good silver in a set of rituals and habits, manners and recipes.²⁸

²⁵ Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).

²⁶ Tom Philpott, "Table Talk: A Conversation with Michael Pollan," *Grist: Environmental News and Commentary*, no. 12 October 2007, <http://www.grist.org/feature/2007/10/12/pollan/>.

²⁷ See his essay in this volume.

²⁸ Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 411.

For him, that was then, but this is now. Pollan muses however that perhaps if “so much of [the] context [of family and...culture had] not been lost,” he might not have felt the need “to start from scratch” to invent a new meal ritual to remind us “What it is we’re eating. Where it came from. How it found its way to our table. And what, in true accounting, it really cost.” If our old cultural and family traditions still meant to us what they used to,

we would no longer need any reminding that however we choose to feed ourselves, we eat by the grace of nature, not industry, and what we’re eating is never anything more or less than the body of the world.²⁹

I have to disagree. With all due respect to Reb Pollan, we always *do* need to be reminded. It is human nature that satisfying our hunger puts our brains to sleep. That’s exactly why the wisdom of our Jewish family and culture instructed us to bless God right after we have satisfied our hunger - because it is *precisely then* that we are most likely to forget the source of our sustenance, “as it is written (Dt.8:10) ‘You shall eat, and be satisfied, and [*then*] bless the Lord your God’” (i.e., recite the grace after meals).³⁰ We don’t have to start from scratch, nor can we really, because as the Zohar teaches us, “Blessings don’t rest on nothing.” We have this “good silver” in our “set of rituals and habits, manners and recipes.” But they only work if we use them, not, as Pollan tellingly puts it, if we only keep them “stored away.” Moreover, our tradition also teaches us that there are “apples of gold behind the settings of silver” (Prov. 25:11). For me, the apples of gold are the fruits of the of the kabbalistic imagination, namely, its symbols and rituals, which can sustain us by suggesting ever new ways to see and weave the lines of connection between us, one another, and the world.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 411.

³⁰ Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, 493-4.

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