

Food for Thought

Parshas Vayigash

By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

Judiasm teaches to elevate the profane, to sublimate the mundane, and to bring sanctity to the physical aspects of life. Anyone familiar with this Jewish concept can readily appreciate the appropriateness of Torah study at the table during a meal. Dining is a most elemental human experience; yet it is imbued with much metaphysical meaning, with intellect, with holiness. Quite simply, since the consumption of food is the fuel for a higher purpose, that of a fiery service of the Al-mighty, it is thus most proper to envelop the very meal with that higher purpose by blending it with Torah study.

The Mishna in Avoth (3:4) compares a group of three who dine together and speak words of Torah at the table to a table before G-d. It is obvious that even one individual dining by himself should study Torah at the dining table. What is added when three dine together is that it is considered a quorum for the purpose of Zimun, the special group grace after meal, raising thus their group study to that of group (quorum) study.

The Shalo writes that the custom to recite Psalm 137, “Al Naharoth Bavel” (at the rivers of Babylon) before grace after meal is in order to mention the destruction of the Beth Hamikdosh. The relevance seemingly is the fact that the Torah dining table resembles the altar in the Beth Hamikdosh. Chasidim relate that at the dining table of the Sanzer Rav z”l, even on a summer day when flies would abound in the room, not even one fly would be seen on the dining table itself. They explain that a Tzadik’s dining table is likened to the altar in the Beth Hamikdosh about which it is told (Avoth 5:7) that a fly was never seen upon it.

This may accord a deeper insight into a fundamental prerequisite on the eve of Yaakov’s journey to Egypt. “And Judah he (Yaakov) sent before him unto Joseph ‘LEHOROTH’ to guide the way before him unto Goshen” (Braishis 46:28). Say the rabbis (quoted in Rashi) that Judah was sent in advance in order to establish a house of Talmud, (LEHOROTH, from Horaah, to decree). When Yaakov heard the good news that Joseph was alive, he was faced with a serious

inner conflict. Though his heart craved to see his son Joseph, and though he suffered the hardships of a famine, he was reluctant to leave the Holy Land. He realized that Joseph could not send large supplies to Canaan, lest, as the RaMBaM points out, the Egyptians suspect him of privately exporting food for business. Yaakov was surely sensitive to reactions of gentile neighbors (see 35:30). Another option could have been considered; he would try to survive on whatever meager supply available rather than leave the Land. Were not Machalon and Chilyon punished for leaving the Land in time of a famine? (See Rashi Ruth 1:1 and RaMBaM Melachim 5:9).

Joseph anticipated Yaakov's attitude, and sent an urgent message: There is no choice but to leave and come to Egypt, "for there are yet five years of famine; lest you become impoverished..." (45:11). According to the Baal Haturim, Joseph pleaded with his father for the sake of Torah study (based on the identical word in the context of learning), "lest you become impoverished of Torah, for you will be unable to study during the famine." "Where there is no sustenance there is no Torah" (Avoth 3:21), and one is permitted to leave the Holy Land for the sake of Talmud Torah (see Avodah Zarah 13a, and RaMBaM *ibid.*). Joseph, thus, prepared the Halachic groundwork for Yaakov's exodus.

Since the main purpose of his exodus was to safeguard the Beth Hamedrosh, this became the first in order of duty. Assigning this task to Judah, he achieved a smooth transition of the house of study.

The relevance of food vitamins to Torah comprehension can be expounded, more profoundly, as follows: Food chemistry accords more than mere nourishment and energy to enable the body, including the mind, to function. In the food item is absorbed certain ingredients which directly affect the thinking process of the consumer. Non-kosher food, for example, is to be kept from even an infant, who is not obligated to observe other Mitzvoths at all, (see Yebamoth 114a). The reason for this is that it has a negative effect on the mental process, which can be damaging later when the child grows up. In contrast, kosher food, partaken in accordance with Torah requirements, contains the ingredients of a positive nature in the ability to grasp Torah insight. The Tree of knowledge (Brasishis 3:1-6), and the Tree of life (*ibid.* 3:22-24) are good examples. The tree of knowledge is surely

an instance of knowledge or insight contained in a fruit. The tree of life, one may suggest, is also an item which contains ingredients which arouse sharper mental insight, as a result of which one may attain everlasting life. When Moshe asked G-d to reveal to him His glory, G-d replied; "Thou canst not see My face; for no man can see Me, and live" (Shemos 33:21). The Medrosh expounds that the high level of revelation which Moshe asked for would automatically have resulted in everlasting life. Since man was decreed a limit to the years of his life, Moshe was therefore told that no man can see G-d, for that divine insight and knowledge would result in everlasting life, (see Yismach Moshe). The tree of life was thus also a mind opener.

The above items of food with special ingredients are symbolic of food in general. The dining table widens the vision and enlarges the scope of the mind, thus inspiring to better serve G-d. When grace after meal is recited, thus, one includes special thanks "for Thy Torah which Thou hast taught us." This is also a reference to the insights generated as a direct result of dining. The very chapter in the Torah enjoining the Mitzvah to recite grace after Meal (Devorim 8:10) also teaches that "not on bread alone liveth man, but by what proceeds out of the mouth of G-d doth man live" (8:3).

Yaakov consented to Joseph's plea to come to Egypt when he realized that his intellectual and spiritual life depended on this journey. He agreed to leave the Holy Land only following G-d's promise to him that He would be with him there until the day of return back to Eretz Yisroel (40:4)