

HAZON FOOD CONFERENCE 2008

MYSTICAL COMMUNITY AND THE WELCOMING OF GUESTS

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1. Words of Torah at the Meal

“Rabbi Shimon [bar Yoḥai] 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, ‘Yea all tables are covered with vomit and filth without God.’ (Isaiah 28:8) 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, ‘And he said unto me, “This is the table that stands before the Lord.”’” (Ezekiel 41:22) (*Pirqa Avot* 3:3)

“It is written about a table over which words of Torah are not recited that “Yea, all tables are covered with vomit and filth, so that no space is left, “ (Isaiah 28:8) and it is prohibited to recite a blessing over such a table. Why is this so? Because there is one kind of table and another kind of table. There is a table that is prepared before the blessed Holy One above and it is always prepared to have words of Torah recited upon it and to comprise the letters of the words of Torah within it. He gathers them towards Himself comprising them within Himself and they are perfected and rejoice in Him and He [also] rejoices. It is said about this table, “This is the table that stands before the Lord.” (Ezekiel 41:22) There is another table that does not have a portion in the Torah and does not have a portion in the holiness of the Torah, and that table is called “vomit and filth” and this is the one that has no place inasmuch as it has no portion in the side of holiness. Consequently, a table over which words of Torah are not recited is a table of vomit and filth. (*Zohar* 2:153b-154a)

2. Mood at the Meals

“On the Sabbath, one has to give the appearance of satiation to overturn the maidservant Lilith. And in the place of sadness of Shabbatai, [one must] give the appearance of delight; in a place of darkness, a candle; in a place of suffering, delight. [All of this is done] in order to effect a transformation in everything.” (*Zohar Ḥadash* 33d)

“[It is good to drink] wine below in order to display joy to that other supernal wine [*Gevurah*].” (*Zohar* 1:248a)

Commenting on “You shall rejoice before the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 12:18):

“This [the rejoicing] is the cup of blessing. When a person says the blessing [after a meal] with a cup of blessing he must rejoice and display his joy with no sadness at all. When a person lifts up the cup of blessing the Holy One, blessed be He, is upon him and he must enwrap his head with joy.” (*Zohar* 2:168b)

3. Atonement & Welcoming Guests

“Rabbi Yoḥanan and Rabbi Eleazar both explain that as long as the Temple stood, the altar atoned for Israel, but now a person’s table atones for him.” (*b. Berakhot* 55a)

Rashi on a parallel statement in Ḥagigah (27a): “a person’s table atones for him”: “through welcoming guests” (*be-hakhnasat orḥim*).

“Rabbi Abba also said: It is written, ‘You shall dwell in *sukkot* seven days’ and subsequently ‘[they] shall dwell in *sukkot*’: first of all ‘you’ and then ‘they.’ The first refers to the guests and the second to human beings. The first refers to the guests, as was the custom of Rav Hamnuna Sava. After he had entered the *sukkah* he would rejoice and stand just inside the door of the *sukkah*, and say, ‘Let us invite our guests. Let us prepare the table.’ He would then stand and pronounce the benediction, and say, “You shall dwell in *sukkot* seven days.’ Be seated guests from on high, be seated! Be seated, guests of faith, be seated!” He would raise his hands, and rejoice, and say, ‘Happy is our portion! Happy is the portion of Israel, as it is written ‘For the Lord’s portion is His people . . .’ (Deut 32:9). Then he would sit.

“The second refers to human beings. Whoever has a portion in the people and in the Holy Land dwells in the shade of faith and welcomes the celestial guests, so that he may rejoice both in this world and the next. In addition, however, he must help the poor to rejoice. Why? Because the portion of the celestial guests whom he has invited belongs to the poor. And if he dwells in the shade of faith, and invites these celestial guests, and the guests of faith, and fails to give them their portion, they all arise and leave him, saying, ‘Do not eat the bread of him that has an evil eye . . .’ (Prov. 23:6). And so the table that he has prepared belongs to himself alone, and not to the blessed Holy One. Of this person it is written, “I will spread dung upon your faces, [the dung of your festivals]’ (Malachi 2:3). ‘The dung of your festivals,’ not ‘My festivals.’ Alas for that man when the guests of faith arise from his table!’ (*Zohar* 3:103b-104a; trans. from Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, with minor modifications).