

Thought Texts



Guilt Free

Most people have trouble cultivating a guilt-free celebration of food. It's not that we don't love to eat, it's just that so many of us believe that if food is not nutritious, it is inherently bad. Any pleasure we derive from 'bad' food must be a guilty pleasure—there's no room here for a carefree celebration of chocolate éclairs. If we spend our mealtimes counting nutrients and assessing our food on the good-bad scale, our food theology is in conflict with the Jewish principle of celebrations.

—Dr. Wendy Mogel, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*

Questions for Discussion

- Do you resonate with the idea that it can be difficult to have a guilt-free celebration of food? When do you celebrate with food in your own life?
- What do you think Mogel means here when she says, “our food theology is in conflict with the Jewish principle of celebrations”?
- How might you try to instill a healthy relationship to food within your family?

Choni Ha'Maagal

Rabbi Johanan said: Throughout the days of his life, this righteous man [Choni] was troubled about the meaning of the verse, "A song of ascents: When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were veritable dreamers." (Ps. 126:1)

He said: Is it possible for a man to dream continuously for seventy years?

One day he was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree.

He asked him, How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit?

He replied: Seventy years.

He then further asked him: Are you certain that you will live another seventy years?

He replied: I found [ready grown] carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted these for me so I too plant these for my children.

– *Talmud Bavli, Masekhet Ta'anit 23a*

אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: כָּל יָמָיו שָׁל אֹתוֹ צָדִיק הָיָה
מִצְטַעֵר עַל מִקְרָא זֶה (תְּהִלִּים קכ"ו) "שִׁיר
הַמַּעֲלֹת בְּשׁוֹב ה' אֶת שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן הָיִינוּ
בְּחֹלְמִים."

אָמַר: מִי אֵיבָא דְנַיִים שְׁבַעִין שָׁנִין בְּחֹלְמָא?

יֹמָא חַד הוּא אָזַל בְּאוֹרְחָא, חֲזַיִה לְהוּוּא
גְּבָרָא דְהוּא נֹטַע חֲרוּבָא.
אָמַר לֵיהּ: עַד כַּמָּה שָׁנִין טַעִין?

אָמַר לֵיהּ: עַד שְׁבַעִין שָׁנִין.

אָמַר לֵיהּ: פְּשִׁטָּא לָךְ דְּחַיִּית שְׁבַעִין שָׁנִין?

אָמַר לֵיהּ: הָאִי [גְּבָרָא] עֲלָמָא בְּחֲרוּבָא
אֲשֶׁבְחַתִּיהּ, כִּי הֵיכִי דְשָׁתְּלִי לִי אֲבָהָתִי –
שָׁתְּלִי נָמִי לְבָרָאִי.

Questions for Discussion

- What food traditions do you want to pass along to your children?
- How does or could our tradition of valuing our children and their future inform our choices about what food we buy and eat?
- In what ways might you be 'planting carob trees' for the future generally, and specifically in relationship to food? In what ways were carob trees planted for you?

The Importance of Family Dinners

While narratives are told among family members in numerous settings, dinnertime is a preserved moment for this activity in many American families. Dinnertime is a time when adults and children often come together after being apart throughout the day, a somewhat unique time period for many families wherein there is some assurance of a relatively captive audience for sounding things out. Dinnertime is thus an opportunity space – a temporal, spatial, and social moment which provides for the possibility of joint activity among family members. Families use this opportunity space in different ways: some talk more than others; some talk only about eating; other use the moment to make plans or recount the day's events. Whatever direction the talk takes, dinnertime is a potential forum for generating both knowledge and social order/disorder through interaction with other family members. Dinnertime provides a crystallization of family processes, what activity theorists might call a 'generically primary example' of family life.

—Elinor Ochs, Detective Stories at Dinnertime: Problem Solving through Co-Narration

Questions for Discussion

- What are your memories of family dinners growing up?
- What is your vision for family dinners in your family?
- How might you find ways to make time for family dinners as your family grows?

Shabbat Blessing for Children

Jewish tradition brings us many beautiful rituals that help to create a special family atmosphere around the Shabbat table. From the special blessings that we say over the food, to singing together around the table, to spending time together as a whole family, ritual helps us to separate Shabbat from the rest of the week.

In many homes, parents will ritually bless their children each week before Shabbat dinner. Some families say the blessing to all of their children at once, and some families say it to their children separately. Some

יְשִׁמְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאֶפְרַיִם וְכַמְנַשֶּׁה: *To sons, say: May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe.*

Ye'simcha Elohim ke-Ephraim ve'chi Menashe

יְשִׁימְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּסָרָה רִבְקָה רָחֵל וְלֵאָה: *To daughters, say: May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.*

Ye'simech Elohim ke-Sarah, Rivka, Ra-chel ve-Lay'ah

יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ: *May God bless you and protect you.*

Ye'varech'echa Adonai ve-yish'merecha

יָאֵר יְהוָה | פְּנֵי אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחֲנֶנֶךָ: *May God shine God's face on you and be gracious to you.*

Ya'eir Adonai panav eilecha viy-chuneka

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה | פְּנֵי אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּשֵּׁם לָךְ שְׁלוֹם: *May God turn God's face toward you and grant you peace.*

Yisa Adonai panav eilecha, Ve-yaseim lecha shalom

Questions for Discussion

- What qualities do you hope your children have when they grow up?
- What blessings do you hope to confer on your children?
- What would it mean for your children to live in peace?

touch their child's head while they say the blessings, and some stand in a circle holding hands. Some families recite the traditional brachot, and some families use their own special blessings.

The Radish Eater

At the third meal on the Sabbath, an intimate and holy gathering, the hasidim at Rabbi Wolf's table carried on their conversation in a low voice and with subdued gestures so as not to disturb the zaddik (holy man) who was deep in thought. Now, it was Rabbi Wolf's wish and the rule in his house that anyone could come in at any time, and seat himself at his table. On this occasion too, a man entered and sat down with the rest, who made room for him although they knew that he was an ill-bred person.

After a time, he pulled a large radish out of his pocket, cut it into a number of pieces of convenient size, and began to eat with a great smacking of lips. His neighbors were unable to restrain their annoyance any longer. "You glutton," they said to him.

"How dare you offend this festive board with your tap-room manners?"

Although they had tried to keep down their voices, the zaddik soon noticed what was going on. "I just feel like eating a really good radish," he said. "I wonder whether anyone here could get me one?" In a sudden flood of happiness which swept away his embarrassment, the radish eater offered Rabbi Wolf a handful of the pieces he had cut.

—Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*

Questions for Discussion

- How is a meal eaten with others different than a meal eaten alone?
- There are plenty of ways to eat around a table. What do table manners look like in your home?

- There is an important lesson here to not “yuck someone else’s yum.” What are ways we can teach this idea to our children?

Shavuot: Learning Together

Jewish tradition teaches that the Torah was given to us on Shavuot. Many celebrate this momentous event by taking extra time to learn during the holiday, even staying up all night studying at a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. Even though most families with young children won’t be studying until the wee hours of the morning, you can still make special time to learn as a family. The dinner table is the perfect place to do it too! We are taught that,

If three have eaten at one table and have spoken over it words of Torah, it is as if they had eaten from the table of God, for it is written (in Ezekiel 41:22) He said to me, his is the table that stands before God.

—*Pirkei Avot 3:4*

The phrase “words of Torah” doesn’t need to be taken literally, it can truly be any meaningful conversation or one where someone else learns something, and the dinner table is the perfect place for this to happen.

Questions for Discussion

- What types of discussions happen at your meals?
- How are discussions different on your weekday dinners versus your Shabbat meals versus your afternoon lunches with friends or coworkers?

- How might we encourage our children to share their thoughts or about their day at the table?
- In what ways does or could your dinner table feel “holy” and special?

The Four Children of the Passover Haggadah

The four children are a vignette of the Jewish people. One asks because he wants to hear the answer. A second asks because he does not want to hear the answer. A third asks because he does not understand. The fourth does not ask because he doesn't understand that he doesn't understand. Ours has never been a monolithic people.

Yet there is a message of hope in this family portrait. Though they disagree, they sit around the same table, telling the same story. Though they differ, they stay together. They are part of a single family. Even the rebel is there, although part of him does not want to be. This too is who we are.

The Jewish people is an extended family. We argue, we differ, there are times when we are deeply divided. Yet we are part of the same story. We share the same memories. At difficult times we can count on one another. We feel one another's pain. Out of this multiplicity of voices comes something none of us could achieve alone. Sitting next to the wise child, the rebel is not fated to remain a rebel. Sitting next to the rebel, the wise child may share his wisdom rather than keep it to himself. The one who cannot ask will in time learn how. The simple child will learn complexity. The wise child will learn simplicity. Each draws strength from the others, as we draw strength from belonging to a people.

-Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Rabbi Jonathan Sack's Haggadah

Questions for Discussion

- In what ways can you identify any of the characteristics of the four children in yourself or your family?
- What do you hope your child might gain from sitting next to you at the table? What do you gain from your child? How have you been impacted by sharing meals with the people who are next to you?
- How does or could the Jewish tradition of story-telling, particularly over meals, play a role in your family?

Division of Responsibility in Feeding

The Division of Responsibility for Infants:

- The parent is responsible for what
- The child is responsible for how much (and everything else)
- The parent helps the infant be calm and organized and feed smoothly, paying attention to information coming from the baby about timing, tempo, frequency and amounts

The Division of Responsibility for Toddlers through Adolescents:

- The parent is responsible for what, when, where
- The child is responsible for how much and whether

Parents' Feeding Jobs:

- Choose and prepare the food
- Provide regular meals and snacks
- Make eating times pleasant
- Show children what they have to learn about food and mealtime behavior
- Not let children graze for food or beverages between meal and snack times
- Let children grow up to get bodies that are right for them

Fundamental to parents' jobs is to trust children to decide how much and whether to eat. If parents do their jobs with feeding, children will do their jobs with eating:

- Children will eat
- They will eat the amount they need
- They will learn to eat the food their parents eat
- They will grow predictably
- They will learn to behave well at the table

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Questions for Discussion

- How is this division of responsibility similar to or different from how you ate with your family as a child?
- Why does Satter choose to describe these guidelines as “responsibilities”? What does it mean for parents to have responsibility to their children?
- Why is it important for parents to trust their children to decide how much and whether to eat?