

## **“Mitzvoth of the Mouth:” A Jewish Theology of Food [Slide 1]**

I have been commissioned to do an entry on food and Jewish theology. I am organizing it around two questions: [Slide 2]

If theology is “God talk,” 1) how is Jewish food “God talk?”

And 2) what are the ways Jewish food, or better, what we do with food Jewishly, can be said to be “talk?”

### **How is Jewish food “God talk?” [Slide 3]**

These questions are especially apropos to the *Encyclopaedia of Theology* panel. I was invited to contribute an entry on the Jewish dietary laws for the *St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*. That raised several questions for me on how to approach this. First, in what sense are Jewish dietary laws in any way *theological*? That prompted three immediate responses. The first is what Edward Greenstein said about Jewish law in general in his chapter on Biblical Law in *Back to the Sources*:

The laws of the Torah are one of its means of teachings; they are the specific behaviors by which God inculcates his ways--what we call values--in his human creatures. If we are to understand these values we must read the laws, in a sense, as a sort of body language that outwardly symbolizes something of much deeper significance.<sup>1</sup>

Jewish food laws and rituals, a subset of the laws of the Torah (Written and Oral), are thus a kind of “body *language*” which teach symbolically “the specific behaviors by which *God* inculcates his ways.” In other words, the laws and rituals concerned with food in Biblical and rabbinic tradition and their subsequent interpretation are indeed a kind of God talk, a theological body

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<sup>1</sup> Ed Greenstein, “Biblical Law,” in *Back to the Sources*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 84.

language. As *mitzvot*, “commandments,” they imply a “Commander” (*Mitzaveh*) and “commandees” (*metzuvim*). It’s communication between *persons* in a *relationship*.

However, this prompted a second response: why restrict this to the traditional Jewish dietary laws, *kashrut*, prescribed in the Torah? Jews at different times and places have expressed their values in many specific eating behaviors that are not limited to keeping kosher, namely: eating specific Jewish holiday foods, like challot, breads, in various seasonal shapes, hamentaschen, and the Hillel sandwich of matzah, bitter herbs, and charoset. There are also food rituals often combining eating, reading and talking, like the Passover and Tu Bishvat seders and food blessings (“mitzvoth with the mouth”). There is what Michael Twitty calls “Jewish identity eating,”<sup>2</sup> as when people choose to eat Jewish deli food, lox and bagels, Sephardic, Ashkenazi, Mizrahi and other ethnically Jewish dishes, Israeli/Palestinian foods; foods from the plethora of Jewish cookbooks. There are intentional expressions of specific Jewish ideological eating practices that are not strictly speaking traditional *kashrut*, such as mystically (especially) Hasidic informed *avodah be-gashmiyyut* (“worship with the body”), “ethical *kashrut*” and Jewish vegetarianism and veganism.<sup>3</sup> Finally we even have transgressive Jewish eating, intentionally not observing kosher rules, like going out for *treyf* Chinese food on Christmas Eve, or eating pork and seafood at a restaurant named Traif.<sup>4</sup> These all exemplify different forms of what I call “gastronomic Judaism as culinary midrash.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Twitty in Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, *Gastronomic Judaism as Culinary Midrash* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, an imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Ari Labendz and Shmuly Yanklowitz, *Jewish Veganism and Vegetarianism : Studies and New Directions* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Brumberg-Kraus, *Gastronomic Judaism as Culinary Midrash*.

<sup>5</sup> Brumberg-Kraus, *Gastronomic Judaism*.

Thirdly, if Jewish food rules and rituals are primarily a *body* language, how do we know these refer to “God?” That’s the *midrash* part of culinary midrash. And midrash, as a traditional practice of Jewish interpretation of Scripture, is typically verbal, spoken or written words about Torah, the word of God. It is arguable that midrash is *the* quintessentially Jewish expression of theology.<sup>6</sup> And it is not only talk about God; as Avivah Gottlieb suggests, it can be an imaginative way of speaking *with* God.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, many Jewish food rituals involve words to accompany the physical materials and gestures of eating, such as blessings, which specifically address “YHWH our God” by name in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person, and then shift to 3<sup>rd</sup> person verbs, e.g., “Blessed are You YHWH our God, who sanctified us by Your commandments, and commanded

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<sup>6</sup> Heschel, Tucker, and Levin, *Heavenly Torah*; Heinemann, *Darkhe ha-agadah*.

<sup>7</sup> Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture*, p.?:

For the midrash to read in the biblical text such intimations of the unconscious life of a people becomes legitimate, in view of one necessary assumption of the rabbinic mind: the implied author of the Torah is God. As Daniel Boyarin succinctly puts it: “This is not a theological or dogmatic claim but a semiotic one . . . If God is the implied author of the Bible, then the gaps, repetitions, contradictions, and heterogeneity of the biblical text must be *read* . . .” The midrashic search for multiple levels of meaning, the attempt to retrieve unconscious layers of truth, is warranted by the assumption that, as God’s work, the Torah encompasses all. “Turn it, and turn it, for all is in it,” says Ben Bag Bag,<sup>14</sup> using the image of the plow turning the earth, breaking, transforming, reversing, subverting. Two thousand years later, such an image of excavation becomes the informing image in Freud’s project: to unearth the repressed life that is encrypted within the human experience. The psychoanalytic project, like the midrashic one, represents a dissatisfaction with surface meanings, and a confidence that rich if disturbing lodes seam the earth’s depths. The activity of the plowman is not only legitimate but imperative: in this way, the interpreter responds to the claim of God’s text.

us to eat matzah.”<sup>8</sup> Such eating with talking makes these rituals doubly “mitzvot with the mouth.”<sup>9</sup>

### **How is Midrash Jewish “God Talk?”**

Thus, my assertion that Jewish food rules and rituals as culinary midrash are indeed an expression of theology depends on my very specific understanding of midrash as theology – Jewish God talk. So what is midrash, and what is culinary midrash? Midrash is the traditional Jewish religious term in Hebrew for interpretation, or more precisely, the interpretation and application of sacred Jewish texts, especially verses from the Torah, to new and changing

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<sup>8</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Bachya ben Asher in his eating manual “Shulchan Shel Arba,” argues that the grammar of the typical formulation of rabbinic blessings makes an important theological assertion, namely,

What goes for this blessing, *al netilat yada'im*, that it is worded with both the explicit second person singular pronoun “You” and the “hidden” pronoun implicit in the third person singular past tense verb form, is the rule for the rest of the blessings that are fixed according to this formula... in order to fix in the heart that the Holy One Blessed be He is both revealed and hidden: revealed in regard to His ways and actions; hidden in regard to His essence and His very Selfhood... So in order to hint at Him being revealed and hidden, Scripture has said, “And your faithful ones shall bless You [Ps 145:10],” that is to say, “in this way they shall bless You:” revealed and hidden, and this what is meant by “They shall talk of the majesty of Your kingship [*kevod malkhutkha*, *ibid.*, 145:11],” using the present tense, to teach about Him being revealed. And it said, “to make His mighty acts known among men [*ibid.*, 145:12]” to teach about Him being hidden.

*Pace* D. Boyarin cited in Zornberg above, R. Bachya’s midrash of Ps. 145:10-12 as applied to blessings, makes the semantic claim into a theological and dogmatic claim!

<sup>9</sup> Brumberg-Kraus, *Gastronomic Judaism*, 144-45.

situations and circumstances. It comes from the verb *darash*, which literally means to seek out or to question. Midrash refers both to this process and to specific books that are collections of such interpretative traditions, especially, though not exclusively, those composed by the rabbis of the period of the Talmud, from around the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. *Midrashim* (the plural), often take the form of stories, even playful re-readings (some might say mis-readings) of Biblical words and stories.

And culinary midrash? To explain that, let me tell you a story, a midrash, about midrash as it were, that I think is apropos. [Slide 4]

“What is this like? It is like a king of flesh and blood who had two servants. And he loved them both with a perfect love. He gave to the one a measure of wheat and to the other a measure of wheat. And he gave to the one a bundle of flax and to the other a bundle of flax. The clever one of the two, what did he do? He took the flax and wove it into a cloth. And he took the wheat and made it into flour. He cleaned it, ground it, kneaded it, and baked it. And he arranged it on a table. And he spread the cloth over it. And he left it until the king returned. And the foolish one of the two - He did nothing at all. Eventually the king returned to his house and said to them, ‘My sons, bring me what I gave you.’ The one brought him the loaf of bread on top of the table with the cloth he made spread over it. The other brought the wheat in a box, and the bundle of flax on top of it. Oy what shame for that one! Oy what a disgrace for him! Which of these shall I say is the more beloved? The one who brought the table and the loaf of bread on it!”

This is a parable about interpretation, and I see the relationship between Jewish meal performances and Jewish meal texts similarly. As a medieval midrash, it probably was originally intended as a polemic against Karaites, who denied the authority of the Oral Torah, the rabbinic traditions which the ancient rabbis said were revealed orally to Moses on Mt. Sinai, along with the written Torah.

Against them, the midrash asserts the necessary relationship between the written and oral Torah, that is, of midrash, interpretation itself. Yes, the raw materials, like the written Torah, come directly from God, since the parable wants us to understand the king to be God. But raw materials aren't intended to remain raw; they're to be worked with and made into

something pleasing and useful. But pleasing, useful, to whom? And clearly, status is the reward for doing something creative, useful, and delightful with the raw ingredients. It is better to “more beloved” than to be shamed and disgraced. But in whose eyes? The King’s! Who is “the King?” For the rabbis, God of course! Hence this midrash is theological – “God talk,” that is, not only talk about God, but also a representation of God’s talking Himself, in the guise of the flesh and blood king’s response to his two servants. But most of us today hardly imagine God as a big bearded man-King in the sky, praising or berating his servants for what they did with the stuff he left them for safekeeping while he went away. Do we even believe in the existence of God at all? Such a midrash could uncharitably be taken as an infantile expression of a need for Big Daddy God/King’s approval. Hasn’t Freud reminded us we’ve grown out of that kind of religion?

No, I think getting stuck on the unwanted king metaphor here misses the point of the midrash.[Slide 5] It’s about arts and craft, creativity, treating what the world gives us as gifts, and the reciprocal exchange of gifts as the expression and maintenance of a relationship we care about. *And it’s about eating, cooking, sharing food, and making it delightful to another person with whom you are in relationship.* The midrash represents preparing, sharing and presenting food beautifully as a theopraxis. A theological body language. Making bread from wheat, challah covers from flax, midrash from the written Torah are expressions of devotion and love, honor and gratitude. Whatever, whoever is the object of those creative, poetic acts is “God.” And it’s so because we literally make it so. Indeed, perhaps, theology, “God talk,” in *this* sense, is a subset of what we might better call “theopoetics.”<sup>10</sup>

Regardless who you think the King might be, or even if you don’t believe in such a King,

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<sup>10</sup> Max Brumberg-Kraus, *The(y)Ology: A Mythic Theopoetics for Queer/Transliberation*. I am very much in debt to my son Max for the many conversations we have had on this topic and for opening my eyes and other senses to theopoetics, as a way of making and embodying theology as art.

I think the texts and traditions about Jewish food—*kashrut*, the holidays, the stories, poems, liturgies—are but raw ingredients, like the flax and wheat of the parable. To “cook” them into something more than what they were originally, is implicitly to seek out, to “*drash*,” something deeper, greater, a taste of being in relationship—an act of culinary midrash, metaphorically and literally. What Jews do with them, in Sephardic, Ashkenazic, Israeli, multi-ethnic fusion, at holidays, in American delis, with kosher, “kosher style” foods, or even “safe treyf,” or outright transgressive Jewish eating are performances of their Jewish identities, in their interpretations and applications of an “oral torah” (so to speak) of the sacred food texts. Sometimes the performances themselves become inscribed, or en-scripted, as texts themselves, e.g., in the Passover and Tu Bishvat seders, in contemporary Jewish cookbooks or better, the rituals and rules of Jewish eating.

### **What are the forms of Jewish food talk?** [Slide 6]

There are three main types of Jewish food talk: (1) the “body language” of Jewish food rules and rituals we discussed above, (2) literal food talk in Jewish texts about food and in the written and oral scripts recited when performing Jewish food rituals of eating and talking, and eating and reading, and (3) sensory non-verbal communication by tasting, smelling, touching, seeing, and hearing what food is “telling us.”

### *Jewish food body language* [Slide 7]

Jewish food body language, “*avodah be-gashmiyyut*” (worship with the body) to borrow the Hasidic term, consists of the Jewish dietary laws, Jewish holiday food rules, and other Jewish food rituals. For example, the Jewish dietary rules (*kashrut*) concerned with eating the flesh of

clean vs. unclean animals, appropriate slaughter of such animals, not mixing dairy with meat products, and prohibition of Gentile wine (“wine poured to idols”); Jewish holiday food rules such as the command to eat matzah and prohibit leavened bread during Passover, giving gifts of food (*shalah manot*), to have two loaves of bread for each of three Sabbath meals; and other food rituals such as eating dairy foods for Shavuot, tree fruits on Tu Bishvat (the Jewish New Year for the Trees), fried foods on Chanukah, and the “Hillel sandwich” of matzah, charoset, and maror at the Passover seder. Not to mention going out for Chinese food on Christmas Eve, or bagels with lox and *shmear* for brunch. These last examples don’t have the authority of Jewish law, but they nevertheless are body language expressions of Jewish identity.

#### *Literal Jewish food talk* [Slide 8]

For examples of literal Jewish food talk, what I like to call “mitzvot with the mouth,” in rituals of eating and reading, eating and talking, we have food blessings (over bread, wine, bitter herbs, tree fruits and ground fruits) the grace after meals – *birkat ha-mazon*, etc.; food ceremony scripts (“haggadot” or seders) like for the Passover Seder, the Tu Bishvat seder, the “seder” of blessings for Shabbat and festival meals; and scripted improvisation or talking points (“words of Torah over/about the table” [m. Avot 3:3]) such as in Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher’s 14<sup>th</sup> century mystical eating manual *Shulhan Shel Arba* [“Table of Four”]). Modern examples of such Jewish food texts are Jewish cookbooks and online Jewish food blogs. [Slide 9]

#### *Sensory non-verbal communication* [Slide 10]

To these first two forms of Jewish food talk I’ve added sensory, non-verbal communication from the food and what we do with it, such as the visual art of illuminated Passover haggadot, the visual and tactile cues of challah plates and covers and other food related



Jewish ritual objects, and the smells and tastes of what I see as Jewish taste preferences or “flavor principles.” Jewish taste preferences are somewhat akin to what Elizabeth Rozin and John Prescott describe as flavor principles. They are really more than taste per se, but rather, the *combination* of certain patterns of preferred tastes, aromas, ingredients, textures, cooking methods, etc., characteristic of different regionally-based ethnic groups.<sup>11</sup>

The principles can be traced back to sacred texts like the Bible and rabbinic literature that articulate them in religio-cultural prescriptions. In other words, reading, talking, and eating together results in a value-added aesthetic experience. Their effect makes some flavors pleasurable, others disgusting. For example classical Jewish texts and practices profess preferences for roasted, aromatic, salty, umami meat flavors; “sweetening the bitter” (as in charoset and the “Hillel Sandwich”); greens in certain circumstances; refined wheat bread (vs. rice or maize) as a staple, and abhorrence for certain flavors and flavor combinations: pork, seafood, meat with dairy, mayonnaise on white bread. There are seasonally prescribed preferences, too - certain foods on certain holidays, like unleavened bread during Passover in the spring, sweets at Purim, fried foods in the dead of winter during Chanukah.

This is a phenomenon that John Prescott, a psychologist of taste and other sense perceptions calls “evaluative conditioning.” About evaluative conditioning Prescott says,

it is possible that we automatically form associations between the context or environment in which the exposure occurs and the exposed item...[T]he context in which a food is consumed is obviously a crucial part of the eating experience and thus the degree to which a food or meal is pleasurable. It has been shown that a familiar food or meal will be enjoyed more if it is eaten in an environment that is highly regarded.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John Prescott, *Taste Matters: Why We like the Foods We Do* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012) p. 150.

<sup>12</sup> Prescott, *Taste Matters*, p. 69.

Basically, Jewish scriptural and ritual traditions “evaluatively condition” certain flavors or combinations of flavors into what I am calling “Jewish flavor principles.”<sup>13</sup> And conveyed in these Jewish flavor principles active in the multisensory performance of Jewish food rituals, “mitzvoth with the mouth,” is an implicit theology about who or what one is relating to when experiences them – let’s say “God.”

### *Synesthetic Metaphors of Experiences of the Divine*

I have argued that the Hebrew Bible and post-Biblical Jewish midrash represents experiences of “the Divine” in synesthetic metaphors.<sup>14</sup> Take for example the mixed sensory metaphors in these verses: [Slide 11]

1. “Truly the ear tests words as the palate tastes food” (Job 12:11)
2. Song Of Songs
  - a. 1:1: “The song of songs, by Solomon. Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth, for your love is sweeter [lit., “better,” *tovim*] than wine. Your ointments yield a sweet fragrance, your name is like finest oil.”
  - b. 5:1: “I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride, I have smelled my myrrh and spice, Eaten my honey and honeycomb, Drunk my wine and my milk. Eat lovers and drink: Drink deep of love!”
  - c. 2:14: “Let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet [Heb., *arev*], and your face is comely.”
3. “Taste and see that the Lord is sweet [lit., in the Hebrew, “good,” *tov*]” (Ps. 33:9),
4. Ex. 24:11, the Israelite elders at Mt. Sinai “had a vision of God and ate and drank ”
5. Ex.1:14 “They made life bitter [*va-yi-mareru*] for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks.”

We can discern five different ways these synesthetic metaphors use taste combined with other senses to communicate experiences of the divine: [Slide 12]

1. As a multi-sensory experience of sensory “overload” and the coincidence of opposites (e.g., taste vs. sound of *maror* [bitter herb])

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<sup>13</sup> Brumberg-Kraus, *Gastronomic Judaism as Culinary Midrash*.

<sup>14</sup> Brumberg-Kraus, “‘Truly the Ear Test Words as the Palate Tastes Food’ (Job 12:11): Synaesthetic Food Metaphors for the Experience of the Divine in Jewish Tradition.”

2. Bringing near what is sensed from afar, e.g., tasting and seeing; tasting and hearing
3. Tasting and seeing or hearing as *knowing* (“real eating”) like Christian *sapere* = *sapientia*
4. Tasting what is good to see (aesthetically), to do (morally), and to know (conceptually coherent)
5. Tasting what is sweet *and* bitter (Job 12:11)

“God” is all these things, revealed so palpably in the performance of Jewish eating and talking rituals that you can taste who God is. [Slide 13] Just as R. Bahya ben Asher understood the meaning of the Israelite elders’ experience at Mt. Sinai in Ex. 24:11: “They had a vision of God and they ate and drank.” Simultaneously, not sequentially.

### **Is this a Jewish theology?** [Slide 14]

It should be clear by now that I have a pretty expansive understanding of what I mean by “God talk,” the literal meaning of theology. It is not only words; it’s also body language, it’s also what our senses communicate to us. Words accompanying this non-verbal communication may certainly help specify who it is we’re talking about, to whom it is we’re talking, and who’s talking to us. But words themselves are not enough for a *Jewish* theology, and especially not a Jewish theology of food. They are and must be embodied.

What do I think we’re talking about when we’re talking about “God?” In my view, we’re talking about human and “other-than-human persons” (as Graham Harvey discusses in *Food, Sex and Strangers: Understanding Religion as Everyday Life*). And we’re talking *to* them and *listening* to them. It’s akin to the “pluralistic pantheism” Mary-Beth Rubenstein articulates in her book *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters*. I am driven by impulses to connect with, avoid,

and respect Others (i.e., manifestations of “God” or “the sacred”) in our basic life choices: who or what is food, partner, or predator? Having meaningful interaction with human and other than human persons, by “elevating” their difference and sameness, is what I think we mean by the terms “God” or “being in God’s image” in the word games of theology.

Lest you think there’s nothing particularly Jewish about these considerations, that’s the “Jewish food as Jewish theology” part of my Encyclopaedia contribution. Suffice it to say here that I understand Jewish theology more as a mode of practice, of an action-oriented ethos, than as a system of beliefs, as is typical of Christian and Christian-informed theologies.