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**The Ritualization of Scripture in Rabbenu
Bahya ben Asher's Eating Manual *Shulhan Shel Arba'***

By

Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus

Shulhan Shel Arba ["Table of Four"], a short yet encyclopedic ethical manual by the popular thirteenth century Spanish Jewish Biblical exegete and kabbalist Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher, is as important a starting point for "the Jewish view" of eating as pseudo-Nahmanides' *Iggeret Ha-Kodesh* ["The Holy Letter"] is for "the Jewish view" of sex. In *Shulhan Shel Arba*, R. Bahya articulates a "torah of eating" which exemplifies a distinctively Jewish mode of spirituality - one that integrates ritual performance, textual study, and imaginative "midrashic" re-interpretations of ancient traditions in new cultural situations.¹ R. Bahya advocates a sort of ritual "performance" of scriptural verses at meals. Speaking and thinking about certain metaphorical verses from the Torah while dining is intended to fuse ostensibly opposed bodily and psychic capacities into a *single* experience, a ritualized *union* of opposites. The *hanhagot* (rules of conduct) in R. Bahya's *Shulhan Shel Arba* make what the participant *knows* to be separate – body and soul, corporeal human reality and incorporeal divine reality – *experienced* as one. Eating is perhaps our most animal, bodily function, and yet when it is done with "words of Torah," it can become the ultimate form of divine service. Of course, this is based on the much earlier rabbinic idea expressed in m.Avot 3:3: "At every table over which three have eaten and have spoken words of Torah over it, it as if they have eaten from the table of God."² But as Ze'ev Gries has already shown, the afterlife of this tradition in the genre of *hanhagot* literature (beginning in medieval Spain and Provence) demonstrates

¹ Jonathan Brumberg Kraus, "Meat-eating and Jewish Identity: Ritualization of the Priestly 'Torah of Beast and Fowl' [Lev. 11:46] in Rabbinic Judaism and in Medieval Kabbalah," *Association for Jewish Studies Review*, 24/2 (1999), 227-262. In that earlier study I focused primarily on eating itself as a theurgic act, and showed how R. Bahya's theory of eating was a synthesis of Spanish kabbalistic and earlier rabbinic transformations of Biblical priestly "*torot*" of sacrifice and of "beast and fowl," i.e., the dietary rules of Lev. 11. But now my paper expands upon a point I discussed only briefly in that earlier study, that ethical manuals like *Shulhan Shel Arba* "provide rabbinic scholars with a 'script' for embodying Torah... [to] transform Torah verses into 'ritualized metaphors'" (237). Therefore R. Bahya also advocates certain ways of speaking certain words of Torah at meals as spiritually efficacious ritual acts.

² *Shulhan Shel Arba*, Chapter 1, p. 474.

this genre's particular tendency to transform descriptive traditions into prescriptions.³ In other words, the rabbinic descriptive metaphor comparing tables with words of Torah over them to the altar in the Temple, those without them to "sacrifices of the dead" becomes a prescription to say words of Torah over the table. It is what I – following the ritual theory of James Fernandez - would call the ritualization of a metaphor.⁴

Rabbenu Bahya creates new rituals by having people say or concentrate on specific scriptural metaphors at the specific time they are gathered together for communal meals. The metaphors and order of the meal practices are themselves old – inherited rabbinic traditions. What's new is R. Bahya's instructions that groups of three or more say words of Torah *about* the table while they are gathered to eat *over* the table. That is, R. Bahya's interpretation of the metaphoric tradition he inherited from m. Avot 3:3 not only turns it into a prescription, but also seems to play on the double meaning of *al* in the Hebrew phrase *divrei ha-Torah al ha-shulhan*. - "**Words of Torah about the table over the table.**" His ritual innovation is to specify which words of Torah at which times.

R. Bahya makes certain specific verses of Torah an integral component of the eating rituals themselves, the "things said" - to use the terminology of Jane Harrison's

³ Zeev Gries, *Sifrut ha-hanhagot: toldoteha u-mekomah be-haye haside R. Yisra'el Ba'al Shem-Tov* (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 1989) pp.18-22.

⁴ James W. Fernandez, "The Performance of Ritual Metaphors," *The Social Use of Metaphor*, ed. J. David Sapir and J. Christopher Crocker (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 1977) 100-131; *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1986). Ivan Marcus has used this approach quite successfully to interpret medieval Northern European Jewish eating rituals in his book, *The Rituals of Childhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) cf. esp. 5-7. It was Marcus' study of Jewish "ritualizations of metaphor" in particular that inspired my work on R. Bahya's use of scriptural metaphors.

More generally, the comparative study of scriptures, the theory that "scripture" is a cross-cultural category of religious experience, informs my approach here. Scripture in Willam Graham's words is a "relational concept." What makes something "Scripture," what makes something Torah is not only its content, but what people do with it, how they treat it. For this theoretical approach, see especially William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1987) and "Scripture," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Mircea Eliade. New York: Macmillan, 13: 133-145); Wilfred Cantrell Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Miriam Levering, ed. *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989; and Jeffrey Timm, ed., *Texts in context: traditional hermeneutics in South Asia* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1992). For studies of Torah from this comparative perspective, see Barbara Holdrege, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1996); Martin S. Jaffee, "A Rabbinic Ontology of the Written and Spoken Word: On Discipleship, Transformative Knowledge, and the Living Tests of Oral Torah," unpublished paper read at the American Academy of Religion Consultation on the Comparative Study of "Hinduisms" and "Judaisms" (November, 1996).

classic definition of rituals.⁵ Rituals in general, and these eating rituals in particular, integrate three basic structural components: “things shown” (the ritual “props” themselves like the table, bread, table cloths, knife, one’s own ten fingers), “things said” (statements about the props like “this is the table before the Lord” or “Blessed are You Lord our God who brings forth bread from the earth”), and “things done” (the formal, ordered activities of manipulating and eating the talked-about props). Blessings, songs, the verses of Torah upon which *Shulhan Shel Arba* instructs its readers to concentrate, or talk about - are all examples of “things said” *within* a ritual. Thus words about rituals can be a constituent part of rituals. These “things said” play the crucial role of labeling, of transforming ordinary behaviors into something extraordinary. They are the “mode of paying attention” that makes otherwise unremarkable behaviors into rituals – behaviors performed with a heightened consciousness of their meaning.⁶ As Baruch Bokser says regarding the rabbinic Passover *seder*, the process of ritualization takes “an accident [or peripheral feature] and by projecting upon [it] both significance and regularity, annihilates its original character as accident.”⁷ Thus R. Bahya takes random Scriptural references to the table, and to eating or drinking from the vast corpus of Biblical and rabbinic tradition, and the references to Scripture quite likely to occur in the casual conversations of rabbinic scholars at a meal together, as the *divrei Torah* that ought to be regularly uttered and reflected upon at such meals.

R. Bahya “annihilates the accidental character” of *divrei torah al ha-shulhan* (‘words of Torah on/about the table’) in four principle ways. First, he specifies that his little book of *divrei torah al ha-shulhan* ought to be by the hand of its readers whenever they are at a communal table. As R. Bahya says in the rhymed prose part of his introduction to *Shulhan Shel Arba*,

My heart lifted me...to write about this in brief in a book, and to include in it ‘precious sayings,’ so that it 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

⁵ Jane Harrison, “Themis,” *The Myth And Ritual Theory : An Anthology* , ed. by Robert A. Segal (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) 58-82.

⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987) p. 103; “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” *HR* 20 (1980), pp. 113-115.

read in it all that is required at his meal. And if at the time one is eating, he merits the drawing of his inclination to what is in this book of mine, and according to its words, he is sure to be at the level of the pious ones who are perfect in their qualities, who wage the war of HaShem, and oppose all their desires.⁸

Secondly, he argues that the obligation to recite “the Grace After Meals,” *Birkat Ha-Mazon* (which includes Scriptural verses) does not absolve one from their “obligation” to say words of Torah over the table.⁹ Thus, in effect R. Bahya says that additional words of torah are to be said at meals as regularly as *Birkat Ha-Mazon*. Thirdly, R. Bahya gives explicit instructions to think about one verse in particular while eating meals: Ex 24:11: “they [the leaders of Israel] envisioned God and they ate and drank.” (וַיִּחַזְּרוּ אֶת הָאֵל הַיָּהוָה וַיֵּאָכְלוּ וַיִּשְׂתּוּ). Finally, besides Ex 24:11, R. Bahya gives the same type of explicit instructions to think about other specific Torah verses while eating a meal. If the first two points ritualize *divrei ha-torah al ha-shulhan* by making them regular obligations, it’s the explicit instructions to think about or concentrate on certain specific verses that ritualizes them in the sense of making them “things said” in order to “project significance” on the accidental actions of eating.

The language which R. Bahya uses to instruct his readers to think about Exodus 24:11 and other specific verses is clearly intended to add an intellectual dimension to the physical act of eating meals. R. Bahya uses the language of “turning one’s *mahshavah*” (“thought, mind, or intention”) to and having one’s *mahshavah* “ramble about” (*meshotetet*) God, or to “fixing one’s intention on the purpose” (*le-hitkavven...takhlit kavvanato*) when one is eating, or to reflect upon (*li-hitbonen*) the appropriate scriptural verses one should have in mind.¹⁰ For example, Bahya says

And thus it is necessary that when one eats, he turn his thought [*mahshevato*] and that it ramble about [*meshotetet*] the Holy One Blessed Be He over each and every bite – according to the matter of “They envisioned God and they ate and drank.” [Ex 24:11]¹¹

⁷ Bokser, “Ritualizing the Seder,” 445, citing Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” *HR* 20 (1980), pp. 113-115.

⁸ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 460.

⁹ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 474; *PA*, p. 577.

¹⁰ E.g., *Shulhan Shel Arba*, pp. 495, 496

¹¹ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 496.

Or,

Know that it is fitting for a righteous person to focus his intention while eating [*yitkavven be-akhilato*] only on the fact that the bodily meal through which his body is sustained for the moment will allow the soul to show its powers and bring them to action, and by this will acquire the eternal meal that will sustain him forever. And look at the holy status of the “leaders” [lit., *atziley*] of Israel, who were eating and looking with the heart itself [or, at Him with their heart] - *this* is what is written, “They envisioned God and they ate and drank,” [Ex 24:11]. For the limbs of the body which are the instruments of the soul receive power and strength from the meal, and the soul through its powers is stimulated for them and strengthens them with *this thought* [*be-mahshavah ha-zot*]...and his body is clothed in the thought of his soul – and the two of them together are as good as one and fit for the Shekhinah to dwell amidst them, and this was the intention of Moses and the elders at Jethroe’s banquet.¹²

These and similar references seem to specify what R. Bahya means at the beginning of the chapter in which they appear, when he says, “It’s a great obligation for a person to reflect upon [*le-hitbonnen*] the nature of eating and to reflect upon [*le-hitbonnen*] its proper end [*takhlit*].”¹³ One reflects on the nature of eating precisely by reflecting upon those specific verses of Torah that metaphorically refer to the meaning and purpose of eating. Even here, where R. Bahya goes on to say that eating is basically the “annihilation of what’s eaten and lost,” I think his point is that the thinking itself, the intellectual act is what makes visible bodily eating into invisible soul nourishment – something like turning something into nothing.

At this point, one may object and say that R. Bahya instructs people only to think about these scriptural verses, and not necessarily to say them out loud, as part of ritual of eating a communal meal. However, even though R. Bahya prefers verbal expressions for cognitive activity to describe what one is to do with the scripture verses, i.e., *taskil*, *teda’*, as well as *lehitkavven*, turn one’s *mahshavah*, let one’s *mahshavah meshottetet*, *le-hitbonnen*, etc., it seems unlikely that this mental activity could function

¹² *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 495.

¹³ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 491.

the way it's supposed to were it not thinking aloud. Moreover, to understand these terms otherwise would be inconsistent with the general remarks R. Bahya makes at the beginning of his book obligating meal-goers to say words of Torah over/about the table, and the analogy he draws between these additional words of Torah and the obligatory berakhot that are obviously spoken aloud. One is to “read [*kara*] – presumably aloud - “from his book, all that is required for a meal.”¹⁴ And Bahya says, of all the seven orifices of the face, the mouth is the most important one, the “chosen” one, for “the mouth is the instrument designed especially for praising Him, for it was created for *no other reason* but this.”¹⁵ R. Bahya makes it clear that God “chose” this organ not simply to eat and drink, but “for the Torah and mitzvot, that it should bless His name and should tell of His renown [*tisapru tehilato*] as in the matter of the heavens and their hosts telling [*misaprim*] of His glory” – telling it aloud, publicly.¹⁶ If thinking with the right intentions is praising God, it must go through the chosen orifice – the mouth. The words of Torah are to function like a mnemonic device, like the recitation of *birkat ha-mazon* after one “has eaten and been satisfied.” Thus Bahya interprets the Scriptural proof-text for the obligation to recite grace after meals, which is itself included in the standard liturgical text of this blessing (“You shall eat and be satisfied and bless the Lord your God [*ve-akhalta vesava'ta u-verakhta et Adonai elohekha*], Dt. 8:10) as follows: “At the time of eating when you are closest to forgetting Him, and your intellect is distracted from knowing Him, at that very moment *know* Him and cleave to Him,” that is, after ‘you have eaten and been satisfied’ and are about to throw off the yoke, ‘*bless* the Lord.’¹⁷ Bahya then goes on to say “*this* in my view is the explanation of the scriptural verse ‘in all your ways, know Him [Prov. 3:6].”¹⁸ Bahya equates “knowing” and “saying a blessing” to God in this argument, suggesting that the cognitive act is something that is mediated through the mouth. Thus the “knowing” of Prov. 3:6 by means of saying a blessing after eating becomes in effect a “complete rite of worship [*avodah*], like one of the divine rites of worship [*ha-avodot ha-elohiyot*, i.e., the divinely ordained sacrifices],”

¹⁴ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 460.

¹⁵ Bahya, *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 475.

¹⁶ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 475, supported with two proof texts using the verb .r/p/x, Ps 19:2 and Is 43:21.

¹⁷ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 493-494.

¹⁸ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 494.

according to Bahya's logical sequence of metaphorical analogies.¹⁹ Also Bahya's instruction that one "lengthen one's time over the table" even after one has finished eating seems to presume that saying words of Torah is what one does to stay longer at the table, since it is in this very context that Bahya asserts that saying *birkat ha-mazon* after eating does not satisfy the obligation of saying words of Torah *al ha-shulhan*. So if I am correct in saying that Bahya means "speak words of Torah" when he says think about, or focus your mind in this or that verse, why doesn't he just say that? I think it is because Bahya wishes to emphasize the invisible intellectual dimension of interpreting Torah as what goes up from the table to God, turning bodily eating into divine service, kind of like the *reah nihoah* of the sacrifices. Or in Bahya's words "the invisible is united with the Invisible, and the visible to the visible."²⁰ Right intentions go to God, while corporeal food is consumed in the belly. That's the theory. In practice, I think Bahya views the words of Torah spoken over and about the table as sort of *kavvanot*, explicit verbal reminders to perform the rituals of eating with conscious awareness of their meaning.

However, when Bahya says, "turn your thought to "they envisioned God and they ate and drank" when you are eating, it is not a simple predication based on a one-to-one correspondence (like Jesus' words at the Last Supper: "This bread is my body, this wine is my blood"). Bahya doesn't just apply independent Scriptural verses to discrete things or actions, but rather, complex *midrashim* of verses to the act of eating. Bahya's ritualization of scripture is what I would describe as "applied midrash." I will briefly discuss two ways in which Bahya applies midrash to the rituals of eating. First, Bahya evokes a rich selection of midrashic traditions about Ex 24:11 for which the phrase – "they envisioned [*va-yehezu*] God and they ate and drank" becomes a sort of conceptual shorthand for a specific theory of prophetic experience as the fusion of body and soul in "real eating" – *akhilah vadai'it*; both body and soul are mutually "nourished" - they "really eat" when experiencing a prophetic vision, *hazon*.. Secondly, Bahya evokes a whole network of metaphors imbedded in specific scriptural verses that he

¹⁹ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 497.

²⁰ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 492. This is R. Bahya's interpretation of Ps 103:1: "My soul – Bless YHWH, all my guts His holy name. The soul blesses God with Torah thoughts, the body blesses God's visible

links associatively, to make the meal mean many things at once – yet all of course, predicated on the meal. I suspect this effect is what Bahya has in mind when he refers to the eater’s “thought ... rambling about [*mahshevato... meshotetet*] the Holy One Blessed Be He.” In both approaches Bahya emphasizes the multiple, even contradictory ways of understanding what “real eating” is, but at the same time their unity, at least in the unified experience of all of them being at play in the performance of the rabbinic meal ritual.

Bahya’s references to Ex 24:11 signal a specific set of concepts important to him. This verse conveys for him the concepts of *akhilah vadai’t*, the “real eating” that occurs when the soul is nourished by a vision of God, and the reconciliation of opposite forms of nourishment, that of the body and that of the soul. Moreover, via Ex 24:11, he associates *akhilah vadai’t* and the resolution of the soul/body opposition with past precedents (the manna in the wilderness), with the future messianic banquet reserved for the righteous in the world to come, and with a whole set of other Scriptural metaphors designed to raise the level of the experience of eating, as well as to raise the status of mindful eaters themselves.

Bahya’s interpretation of “they envisioned God and they ate and drank” as a positive thing is based on the tradition attributed to R. Yohanan in *Vayikra Rabba* that what the leaders “envisioned” was “real eating” – *akhilah vadai’t*. In the context of the original midrash in *Vayikra Rabba* to the parashah *Aharei Mot*, R. Yohanan’s phrase *akhilah vadai’t* is meant in contrast to other possible interpretations of the end of Ex 24:11. וַיֵּחָזְרוּ אֶת הָאֵלֹהִים וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׂתּוּ most of which can be found in *Vayikra Rabba*). It could mean they ate *after* seeing God - the point of the tradition that the leaders celebrated with a banquet since they saw God and survived. Or it could mean that they saw God *as if* they were companions talking to another at the same dinner table – the tradition immediately preceding R. Yohanan’s remark. Thus R. Yohanan’s point is that the vision of God was not like table companions eating together at the same table, but that the vision of God was *really* eating, *akhilah vadai’t*. The leaders were actually nourished from the “light of the face of the King” (Prov 3:6). However, implicit in R. Yohanan’s

attributes - “His holy name” - by eating food in His Name. The single verse emphasizes however that is a simultaneous, coordinated process.

view, at least as R. Bahya interprets it, is that this “real eating” is in contrast to bodily eating, which is really only an illusion, a lie. It is the soul’s eating of the light of the King’s face that’s the real eating.²¹ Or the eating and drinking could have occurred simultaneously with the vision of God, but in a negative sense. The leaders saw God while they were disrespectfully pre-occupied with satisfying their bodily hunger, “with a coarse heart” according to Rashi’s interpretation. Or the point of the verse is conveyed by the word *va-yehezu* – that the leaders of the Israelites had a prophetic vision of God. Here the circumstance that the leaders ate and drank afterward reflects their status in the ranks of prophets. The “*atzilim*” were higher than ordinary Israelites, who were afraid to approach the mountain, but lower than Moses – whose vision of God directly, not through a mirror, enabled him to fast for 40 days and nights – feasting only on the light of the Divine Presence, while the leaders’ mediated vision sustained them only for the moment; they had to eat and drink right afterwards.²² While R. Bahya accepts the validity of all these interpretations, he nevertheless favors the interpretation of this prophetic vision as *akhilah vadai’it* “real eating,” and interprets it to imply a dualistic distinction between soul nourishment and bodily eating.

However, for Bahya, the verse Ex 24:11 both emphasizes and reconciles the opposites of body and soul nourishment. It refers to both visible bodily eating and invisible “soul-eating.” In this verse, body and soul coordinate their distinctive activities in a single process. Their fusion is a cleaving to God, reflected in the syntax of another verse, Ps 103:1: *Barkhi nafshi et YHWH ve-kol kirbi et Shem kodsho* (“My soul – Bless YHWH, all my insides His holy name.”) In this verse, “the invisible [my soul] is united by [Bless] ing with the Invisible [YHWH], and the visible [my insides] to the visible [His holy name].” The two parallel processes are conveyed by a single verb, “bless!” So Bahya urges, “Understand this, that the powers of the soul are revealed and come to action only by means of the body, and if so, the body is greatly needed to proclaim the soul’s high degree and its perfection.”²³ Therefore, “They envisioned God and they ate and drank” refers to this fusion of *akhilah vadai’it* with bodily eating.²⁴

²¹ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 492.

²² *Shulhan Shel Arba*, pp. 492-3 and see also Bahya’s *Biur* on Ex 24:11.

²³ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 492.

²⁴ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 492.

Bahya also associates other examples of *akhilah vadai'it* with Ex. 24:11. The leaders' vision in Ex 24:11 was like the eating of the manna in the wilderness, and similar to the menu of the future messianic banquet. The manna is a form of "light food" [*toldot ha-or ha-elyon* (lit., "offspring of the Upper Light")], analogous to the light of the Shekhinah on which the righteous are destined to feast in the world to come, and the regular diet of the heavenly beings attending upon God.²⁵ Likewise, the *akhilah vadai'it* in Ex 24:11 is a feast of light, as its proof-text in R. Yohanan's midrash states explicitly, "In the light of the face of the King – life!" (Prov 16:15). Indeed, *akhilah vadai'it* has multiple meanings and connotations that all come to bear on the situation when Bahya says to think about Ex 24 verse 11 when you're eating.

Similarly, in his Torah commentary on Ex 24:11, Bahya presents the verse's multiple meanings, but here according to his well-known PaRDe"Š approach, more or less. There Bahya organizes the multiple interpretations systemically under the rubrics "by way of *peshat*," "by way of the midrash," and "the way of the kabbalah."²⁶ Most of the same interpretations appear in both places.

However, the rhetorical effect is quite different in the two texts. In the commentary, you get a sense of the multiplicity of meanings conveyed by the verse, but little sense of how the different interpretations go together. Not so in *Shulhan Shel Arba*. The multiple interpretations of "Vayehezu, etc., ["they envisioned...]" are all brought to bear on the single setting of meal. The context of Scriptural table talk over the table provides a unified Gestalt. Thus, the rhetorical effect is to make the many seem as one. Even Bahya's language of *kavvanah* reinforces this, directing the mind toward a single point – *La-shem shamayim* ("for the sake of heaven.") Consequently, a scriptural verse like Ex 24:11 quite easily functions as conceptual shorthand for a much greater network of significations. If multiplicity of interpretation characterizes midrashic approaches to Torah *per se*, in Bahya's book of meal *hanhagot* - this multiplicity of interpretations is itself ritualized in the experience – the midrashic experience is ritualized.

²⁵ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 457.

²⁶ Bahya, *Biur*, v.2, pp.255-7.

Part of the unifying experience of directing one's mind to the true end of bodily eating via scriptural *kavvanot* is paradoxically that the mind starts to ramble about the rich set of metaphorical associations prompted by the initial impulse to apply the scriptures to the body's activity in the first place. Or as Bahya puts it, bodily eating is elevated into divine service when one both "turns one's thought *and* has it ramble [*meshotetet*] about the Holy One Blessed be He."²⁷ That brings me to my last point about Bahya's use of Scripture in *Shulhan Shel Arba*. Bahya's evocation of a rich complex of many scriptural metaphors encourages his readers to not only to fix their minds on the meaning of eating, but also to let loose their minds to freely associate Ex. 24:11 and many other canonical metaphors with their behavior at the table. Indeed, Bahya goes so far as to compare this midrashic experience of rambling from verse to verse at the table to the ancient Israelites' direct experience of the Divine Presence, the Shekhinah, when they ate the manna. Thus, Bahya says, "the generation in the wilderness, when they were eating the manna, their intention would ramble around [*meshotetet*] the Shekhinah, and they would contemplate."²⁸

Thus Bahya prescribes a ritual of saying words of written and oral Torah at the table that is both free-associative and directed, to mimic the prophetic experience of the Israelites who "envisioned God and ate and drank" at Sinai or who felt the Shekhinah when they were eating the manna. How can it be both? The ritual is free associative since Bahya encourages a free play of the mind "rambling" back and forth from scripture to scripture to the circumstances of the meal where they're spoken. That's the power of the metaphors these scriptures convey, to move the participants' minds to associative thinking. The ritual experience is directed insofar as Bahya points to a specific set of written and oral Torah passages about eating and the table, verses and midrashic complexes, to be said or alluded to, albeit metaphorically, and circumscribes the occasions where they are to be said: meals.

Though I've already referred in passing to many of the metaphorical passages Bahya uses, I think it would still be helpful to conclude with a table of the main root metaphors and the scriptural or talmudic phrases that usually serve as shorthand for

²⁷ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 496.

²⁸ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 496.

them in *Shulhan Shel Arba*, though this chart in no way exhausts the rich array of scriptural allusions R. Bahya has assembled in his little book. I also note (in the footnotes) where and how frequently these verses appear in *Shulhan Shel Arba*, as well in R. Bahya's commentary on the Torah, when he interprets them the same way. Apart from the first metaphor I list, which is probably the most important of the Biblical metaphors Bahya uses, they are in no particular order. However, each metaphor and its accompanying verse(s) possess both verbal and conceptual links to one another that make it difficult not to associate them in the context which R. Bahya presents them. The rabbinic "verses" in particular have a special, double duty here. Like the scriptural verses, they are shorthand for specific metaphors, but they are also shorthand for particular midrashim that give the original scriptural verses and their metaphors different, additional connotations. Thus, the allusions to *Vayikra Rabba*, *b. Pesah* 49b, and *m. Avot* 3:3 are cues to understand the scriptural verses they quote (e.g., Ex 24:11 and Prov. 16:15; Lev. 11:46; and Ez 41:22) according to their midrashic meaning as well as to their *peshat*. In effect, R. Bahya in his ethical manual "practices" the theory of the simultaneously multiple meanings of scripture (PaRDeS = Peshat, Remez, Drash, and Sod) that he "preaches" in his Commentary on the Torah. Thus, the key Biblical and rabbinic "verses" that I've listed in the chart below convey several different root metaphors at once and they are often re-used in different places to emphasize different metaphors. R. Bahya makes a point of using precisely the Biblical and rabbinic shorthand phrases to connect, overlap, and associate the root metaphors, not to mention to legitimate them with the authority of the Written and Oral Torah as the word of God. By listing the metaphors and scriptural shorthand for them that Bahya ritualizes in *Shulhan Shel Arba* here in one place, I wish to offer my readers the opportunity to make the same sort of associative connections Bahya encourages. Of course to really have this occur as Bahya intended, you should be doing this over a meal, with my paper "on [your] table...set down by [your] right hand," as Bahya would say.

Bahya's network of root metaphors:

Root metaphors	Biblical (B) or rabbinic shorthand phrase/midrash (M)
Seeing is eating	B: Ex. 24:11 ויחזו את אלהים ויאכלו וישתו ²⁹
Seeing God [i.e., in a prophetic vision] is “real eating”	B: Ex. 24:11: ויחזו את אלהים ויאכלו וישתו as in M: <i>Vayikra Rabba</i> 20:10: אכילה ודאית
Light is nourishment	B: Is. 66:11: מתענגים מזיו כבודה “Those who enjoy the glow of her glory” ³⁰ B: Prov 16:15: באור פני מלך חיים ורצונו כעב מלקוש “the light of the face of the King is life, like a rain cloud for crops” ³¹
The table (i.e., altar) in the Temple is God's table	B: Ez 41:22: זה שלחן אשר לפני ה' 'This is the table which is before the LORD” ³² B: Job 36:16: ונחת שלחןך מלא דשן “What was set on your table was full of the choice fatty portions” ³³

²⁹ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, pp. 492 (2x), 493 (2x), 495, 496; *Bi'ur Al Ha-Torah*, v.2, pp. 256, 359; v.3, pp. 66, 369

³⁰ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, pp. 457

³¹ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 492; *Bi'ur Al Ha-Torah*, v.1, pp. 165 (petichta to Gen 18 Vayera), 327.

³² *Shulhan Shel Arba*, pp.457, 474, 513.

³³ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 497.

<p>God's table is the <u>Torah scholars'</u> table</p>	<p>B: Ez 41:22: 'This is the table which is before the LORD" (as in M: <i>m. Avot</i> 3:3: 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... 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 [Ez 41.22] "He said to me, 'This is the table which is before the LORD.'"³⁴</p> <p>B: Lev. 11:46: "This is the <u>torah</u> of beast and fowl" as in M: <i>b. Pesah</i> 49b:³⁵</p> <p>עם הארץ אסור לאכול בשר (בהמה) שנאמר זאת תורת הבהמה והעוף <u>כל העוסק</u> <u>בתורה</u> – מותר לאכול בשר בהמה ועוף. וכל שאינו עוסק בתורה – אסור לאכול בשר בהמה ועוף.</p>
<p>Saying words of Torah is offering sacrifices</p>	<p>B: Ez. 41:22 (as in M: <i>m. Avot</i> 3:3): "This is the table which is before the LORD"</p> <p>B: Job 36:16 ונחת שלחך מלא דשן³⁶</p> <p>B: Lev. 11:46: "This is the <u>torah</u> of beast and fowl" as in M:</p> <p><i>b. Pesah</i> 49b:</p> <p>עם הארץ אסור לאכול בשר (בהמה) שנאמר זאת תורת הבהמה והעוף <u>כל העוסק בתורה</u> – מותר לאכול בשר בהמה ועוף. וכל שאינו עוסק בתורה – אסור לאכול בשר בהמה ועוף.</p>
<p>The Divine Presence is Bread</p>	<p>B: verses about manna, e.g., Ex 16:4; Dt.</p>

³⁴ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p.474.

³⁵ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 496.

³⁶ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, pp. 497.

	<p>8:3³⁷</p> <p>B: Nu 28:2: את קרבני לחמי לאשי ריח נחחי; “My sacrifice, my bread, to my fire a pleasing odor” [I give My Presence, (lit., My Nearness, <i>korbani</i>), that is, “My bread,” to my fire, that is, the soul (reading <i>re’ah</i> as <i>ru’ah</i>) pleased with me]³⁸</p>
"Eating burns like fire" [Makes nothing from something, something from something] ³⁹	<p>B: Nu 28:2: את קרבני לחמי לאשי ריח נחחי; “My sacrifice, my bread, [when it goes] <u>to my fire</u> [turns into] a pleasing odor” [i.e., a puff of smoke]</p>
"Torah scholars are God's fire"	<p>B: Nu 28:2: את קרבני לחמי לאשי ריח נחחי⁴⁰</p>
Saying a "blessing to the Lord," that is, <u>talking</u> , is a fusion of body and soul	<p>B: Ps 103: ברכי נפשי את יהוה וכל קרבי את שם קדשו⁴¹</p>
<i>Knowing</i> is divine worship	<p>B: Prov. 3:6: בכל דרך דעהו “In all your ways know Him”⁴²</p>
Bodily eating with thought is divine worship"	<p>B: Lev. 11:46: “This is the <u>torah</u> of beast and fowl” (as in M: <i>b. Pesah</i> 49b: עם הארץ אסור לאכול בשר (בהמה) שנאמר זאת תורת הבהמה והעוף כל העוסק <u>בתורה</u> – מותר לאכול בשר בהמה ועוף. וכל שאינו עוסק בתורה – אסור לאכול בשר בהמה ועוף.⁴³</p>
Bodily eating without thought is beastly A person without an intellectual soul is a	<p>B: Lev. 11:46: “This is the torah of beast and fowl” as in M:</p>

³⁷ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 493

³⁸ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p.492.

³⁹ Brumberg-Kraus, “Meat-Eating,” pp. 251-2.

⁴⁰ Brumberg-Kraus, “Meat-Eating,” pp. 253-5.

⁴¹ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 492.

⁴² *Shulhan Shel Arba*, pp. 494, 497.

⁴³ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 496; Brumberg-Kraus, “Meat-Eating,” p. 255-7.

beast	<p><i>b. Pesah 49b:</i></p> <p><u>עם הארץ אסור לאכול בשר שנאמר זאת תורת הבהמה והעוף כל העוסק בתורה – מותר לאכול בשר בהמה ועוף. וכל שאינו עוסק בתורה – אסור לאכול בשר בהמה ועוף.</u></p> <p>Namely, the “torah of the beast” is the torah <u>about</u> the <i>am ha-aretz</i>, that is, “the beast!”⁴⁴</p>
"The soul feeds on thought as the body feeds on food"	<p>B: Ps 103:1: את יהוה וכל קרבי את שם קדשו⁴⁵</p> <p>M: <i>m. Avot 3:17:</i> תורה אין קמח אין תורה [“Without ‘dough’ there’s no Torah”...]⁴⁶</p>

By saying Scriptural passages that convey these metaphors *at the table*, R. Bahya encourages what I have called a sort of “directed free association.” To reiterate, it 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.”]⁴⁷ Self-conscious experiences of thinking aloud about Torah are fused with the concrete experiences of eating and drinking at the table. That is how R. Bahya “ritualizes” scripture in *Shulhan Shel Arba*. *Shulhan Shel Arba* “scripts” ritual performances of textual study at meals to heighten its users’ awareness of their *experience* of imaginative “midrashic” re-interpretations of Jewish traditions. At its best,

⁴⁴ Brumberg-Kraus, “Meat-Eating,” pp. 243-6, 248.

⁴⁵ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 492, see above, n20.

⁴⁶ *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 496; *Biur* on Ex 24:11.

R. Bahya casts the imaginative play of midrash at the table as experiences of ecstatic prophetic revelation - like those privileged at Sinai to see God as they ate and drank.

⁴⁷ Ez 41:22; the first sentence and inspiration for the title of R. Bahya's work *Shulhan Shel Arba*.