

Eating an Idol

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Eating, plays a very important part in Jewish rituals, every day of the year. Once upon a time, eating sacrifices in the Temple was the centerpiece of Jewish communal life. It hasn't been that way for two thousand years. The table at home has replaced the altar. Every meal has become a spiritual act of worship (in theory if not always in practice).

We are commanded, in Jewish Law, to rejoice in the benefits of the world. Ingesting "meat, fish and all tasty dishes" is a very big part of that. But eating also appears in some very unlikely situations in the Torah. The Sinai revelation in Exodus 24:11 was an awesome transcendental experience. After it, their immediate reaction was to eat and drink. As the text says, "They saw a vision of God and then sat down to eat and drink."

That seems rather trivial and anticlimactic after the drama. But I take this to mean that spirituality should suffuse our everyday existence with deeper levels of significance. It is not just the big occasions that matter. Their encounter with God helped them to eat and drink with greater meaning and significance. Experiencing a partnership with other humans and with God. An example of how the spiritual world enhances the physical.

The Golden Calf episode in Exodus 32:19 that we read this week, gives eating and drinking a purely negative dimension. While Moses was still up on Mount Sinai, God told him about the image of a Golden Calf that the Children of Israel had made in his absence. And they had declared "These are your gods Israel who took you out of Egypt." Surely if they had all experienced the Ten Plagues, the Exodus, Crossing the Red Sea, all of this with Moses acting on behalf of God, what did they think? That this idol that they had just created had done it all? Obviously not surely.

But then the text says " They sat down to eat and to drink and then got up to play." To party. A very different response to the earlier more disciplined reaction after the Sinai Revelation. When they said that "This the god that took you out of Egypt," they meant that now they wanted a different kind of god. When they left Egypt and did indeed witness something amazing, they hoped that this God would lead them out of slavery to a life of self-indulgence. Not the disciplined one Moses expected of them after Sinai. Their eating and drinking was an expression of breaking boundaries, of excess.

After Moses came down from Sinai, he took hold of the Golden Calf and “ground it down until it was very fine, mixed it with water, and then made the children of Israel drink it” (Exodus 32:20). The very idol they had worshipped was fed to them. It passed through their bodies and was excreted. What a way of showing how insignificant and futile the god was. And yet for hundreds of years after the event, the Israelites kept on worshipping a Golden Calf. The Northern Kingdom of Israel set up two of them in Dan and Bethel after Solomon’s death and until they were destroyed by the Assyrians.

When we say we make God in our image, to many people it means that we create a God that will satisfy what we want to do, to suit and justify our preferences. That is the god of modern society; to do as you please, have fun and tell yourself that that is really what God expects of you or indeed what is in your best interests. How easy it is to fool oneself. That is what is meant now, by a Golden Calf.

After the Golden Calf God said to Moses “My anger will burn against them and I will consume them [eat them up] ” (Exodus 32:10). Fire throughout the Bible is used for good and bad. For destroying people as well as elevating them. It is obvious that God, however one envisions God, does not possess the organs for consuming flesh. The expression is a metaphor, as we might say “I am burning with anger or crazy with love.” In a similar way talk about “God smelling the sacrifices” does not imply that God has a nose. Or that Divine anger implies a rising blood pressure. To take these statements at face value is simply foolish.

When the Bible talks about God being angry this is another way of talking about disappointment. We have failed. God saying that He wanted to destroy the Israelites’ meant that they had betrayed their existence if all that life meant to them was self-indulgence. That was not the vision for mankind that God had in mind.

This is why it is our responsibility to distinguish good from bad. To eat responsibly and full appreciation of our good fortune to have it. This is why we should beware of false gods like materialism, fashion, and selfishness. Everything has a purpose and use in life. But indulging without thought, discipline or awareness of consequences can be a form of idolatry every bit as dangerous as it was in Moses’s time. And the same can be said of religion. It can inspire, nourish and elevate. But it can be obsessive, petty, irrational, cruel and obsessed with power and wealth. That too is a Golden Calf.

To anyone infected by the Coronavirus (Covid-19), I wish you a very speedy

recovery. To the rest, keep healthy and safe, and may this awful pandemic pass as quickly as it started.