

Welcome to the Small Group Initiative

Facilitators and Hosts

Session Materials

Session 1

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Welcome To The Temple Beth El Small Group Initiative

We Are What We Eat

The purpose of this group is to build deeper relationships with others through exploring the role of food in our life, our Jewish community, and on the planet. You will have the opportunity to meet for four sessions. Each session will include a 4-5 minute video – accessed through our small groups webpage or YouTube playlist, followed by a series of discussion questions that are included in this booklet. After watching the video as a group, the facilitator of the group allows for discussion around each of the discussion questions connected to the session.

Session #1: The Spirituality of Eating - How To Elevate Our Food Experience - *Rabbi K'vod*

Session #2: Is There Such Thing As Jewish Food - How Food Connects Us To Our People - *Rabbi Rosner*

Session #3: Kashrut and Bringing Intention To Our Food Choices- *Rabbi K'vod*

Session #4: The Ethics of Eating - What Does Our Tradition Ask of Us? - *Rabbi Rosner*

“Facilitators” and “Hosts”

The group members will choose a “**facilitator**” who is responsible for overall communication amongst group members. The facilitator will ensure all four sessions have been scheduled and will act as the “go to” person between the Small Group Chairs and the group.

The group, in advance, decides the time and day of each session. In fairness to all participants, we ask that members rotate a “hosting” role. The “**host**” is responsible for communication and organizing a location for the session. Groups can meet anywhere, homes, parks, restaurants, etc.

The “host” may want to consider the “Think-Pair-Share” strategy for facilitating a discussion where all voices are heard. This strategy:

- *Helps give individuals who need time to process time to formulate thoughts*
 - *Creates a space for individuals to share who may not feel comfortable sharing in a larger setting*
 - *Promotes active listening*
1. **Think:** Participants think independently about the question that has been posed, forming ideas of their own.
 2. **Pair:** Participants are grouped in pairs to discuss their thoughts. This step allows participants to articulate their ideas and to consider those of others.
 3. **Share:** Participant pairs share their ideas with a larger group. Often, participants are more comfortable presenting ideas to a group with the support of a partner. (You can encourage participants to share what they learned from their partner to help encourage active listening).

Session #1: The Spirituality of Eating: How To Elevate Our Food Experience

Rabbi Eliyahu De Vidas, *Reshit Chochmah* (16th century)

Before descending into the body, the soul is nourished as the angels are - directly through the radiance of the Shechina (the Divine Presence). Separated by the body from its former supernal nourishment, the soul now is nourished by physical food (which is the manifestation of that Divine nourishment). Thus, when one eats, one benefits somewhat from the radiance of the Shechina.

בראשית ב':ט'

Genesis 2:9

(9) And from the ground God יהוה caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.

(ט) וַיִּצְמַח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה
כָּל־עֵץ נֹחֵם לְמִרְאָה וְטוֹב לְמַאֲכָל
וְעֵץ הַחַיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הָגֶן וְעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב
וְרָע:

Genesis 3:4-5

(4) And the serpent said to the woman, "You are not going to die, (5) but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad."

בראשית ג':ד'-ה'

(ד) וַיֹּאמֶר הַנָּחָשׁ אֶל־הָאִשָּׁה לֹא־מוֹת
תָּמָתוּן: (ה) כִּי יֵדַע אֱלֹהִים כִּי בְיוֹם
אָכַלְתֶּם מִמֶּנּוּ וְנִפְקַחוּ עֵינֵיכֶם וְהִייתֶם
כְּאֱלֹהִים יֹדְעֵי טוֹב וְרָע:

The Slonimer Rebbe - Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky (1911-2000) taught that when Adam and Eve only ate from the Tree of Life, there was no separation between their eating and their sense of connection with all creation. But when they ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, their eating became only a means to survive.

Discussion Questions

1. In the first text, Rabbi De Vidas suggests that food not only nourishes the body, but the soul. Have you found that food addresses something deeper in you than physical hunger? Try to give words to this experience.
2. The story in Genesis tries to address our experience of duality and why we

feel separate from creation rather than connected. The Slonimer Rebbe applies this story to eating. While eating has the potential to help us connect to the natural world and to God, much of the time it only functions as a satiation of our desires and our need to survive. In what ways does food play this second function in your life. In what ways do you “go a little unconscious” when you eat?

3. What are ways that the eating experience can be fulfilling and connecting for you going forward? How will you make that happen.

Session #2: Is There Such Thing As Jewish Food - How Food Connects Us To Our People

Cholent is a slow cooked dish that is often made of low cost ingredients. It generally contains fatty meat, root vegetables, onions and garlic, paprika, and sometimes *kishke* (filled sausage). It sometimes includes bulgar wheat or rice. The ingredients are placed in a pot or slow cooker and simmered on a low heat for 12-18 hours.

Cholent¹ is a quintessential Ashkenazi stew, once prepared primarily for the Sabbath but now commonly eaten on Thursday and Saturday night as well. The origins of Cholent date back to medieval France, and the ingredients varied within Europe depending on availability and price.

Nowadays, Cholent, once exclusively a meat based dish, sometimes suffers the indignity of being made without meat at all! Vegetarian, even Vegan Cholent, an attempt to marry a traditional aesthetic with modern sentiment, has become quite the rage.

Reform Judaism has a troubled relationship with Cholent. Since 19th and 20th century Reform Judaism often involved purposely breaking away from the Sabbath Laws, Cholent became persona (or chonlonta) non grata. Other Ashkenazi foods remained, primarily Friday night foods such as Matzo Ball soup and Gefilte Fish, and some Saturday lunch foods; but Cholent faded into obscurity. For example, while the Leo Baeck Temple Cookbook from as recently as 1990 lists Boeuf Bourguignon, Borscht, and Red Caviar Madrilene in the same volume, there is no mention of the slow simmering Shabbat staple.

¹ Sometimes spelled Chulent, Tsholent, or Tzalent, depending on transliteration from Hebrew or Yiddish.

Cholent is first mentioned in an Ashkenazi work, *Or Zarua* (composed in 1260), by Isaac ben Moses of Vienna. Within Sephardic communities (and most *halachic* texts), Shabbat stew is known by its Hebrew name, חמין, and it has different ingredients from Cholent.

I saw in France, in the house of my teacher Rabbi Judah ben Isaac, that sometimes they take a cool [pot full of] Cholent and on the Sabbath [they take the already] prepared food and servants light a fire near the pot in order to heat it well, and there are those who remove it and put it next to the fire...²

Culinary scholars theorize that the French Dish [Cassoulet](#) is an adaptation of Cholent with the addition of pork.

Questions:

1. Is Cholent a “Jewish Food?”
2. What other foods do we consider “Jewish Foods?”
3. If a food entered Jewish culture centuries ago from non-Jewish culture (e.g. Gefilte Fish, Braided Challah, Thanksgiving Turkey), when does it become “Jewish?”
4. When does a food go from being “Jewish” to being “mainstream” (e.g. Humus, Bagels, Blintzes).
5. Is there such a thing as “Jewish food?”

²Or Zarua, Hilchot Erev Shabbat: 8 (fin).

ראיתי בצרפת בבית מורי ר' יהודה בר' יצחק שפעמים מקררין צלנ"ט שלהם שהיינו טמון ובשבת טרם עת האוכל מדליקין העבדים אש סמוך לקדרות כדי שיתחממו בטוב ויש שמסלקין אותם ונתנים אותם סמוך לאש ומפרשים להיתר מפני שאין לחוש לאוסרין דמסתמא חמין הן קצת קרוב ליד סולדת בו וכשמוסיפים להם חום מיותר שהרי גם בישראל אין להם ואפי' יתקריין הרבה אין לאוסרין שגם כונתן בעבורם הן ואפי' מתכוני' בעבור ישראל אין לחוש דמסתמא אין ישראל רוצה בכך שאילו יודעו שהקדירות נתקרו לגמרי לא היו מניחים לחמם אותם כלל וכשהעבדים עשים לאו כל כמיניהו לאסור לנו התבשילים בעל כרחנו ובחופות רגילים לאשות כן אבדיהם ואין איש נמנו מלאוכלן וגם ר"ת זצ"ל ושאר גדולי הדור כולם מתירין מיהו נכון וראוי שלא לנהוג כן משום דאוושא מילתא ואיכא זילותא דשבתא וכל מדינה דלא שכיחי בה רבנן ראוי לאסור עליהם דבר זה.

Session #3: Kashrut and and Bringing Intention To Our Food Choices

Rabbi Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 1-16*

Kashrut's primary purpose "is to teach the Israelite reverence for life by (1) reducing his choice of flesh to a few animals; (2) limiting the slaughter of even these few permitted animals to the most humane way [a swift cutting with a sharp knife]; and (3) prohibiting the ingestion of blood and mandating its disposal upon the altar or by burial as acknowledgement that bringing death to living things is a concession of God's grace and not a privilege of man's whim".

Rabbi Benji Stanley, *Reform Judaism in 1000 Words: Kashrut*

Milgrom also points out that the dietary system interacts with the stories of the Torah to teach everyday reverence for life. Adam and Eve seem to be told to be vegetarian. By the time we get to Noah and his generation the Torah and the Eternal have anticipated the Milgram experiment and understand that humans can lapse into the brutal spilling of blood. To re-channel this violent tendency God makes a dietary concession allowing humanity now to eat animals, but not eat the blood. All humanity are thus taught that their eating habits should habituate a reverence for life, and the laws of kashrut then come later to give the Israelites some extra responsibility to role-model limited meat eating[iii].

We might embrace kashrut on this basis, for it is a particularly progressive basis, in the following ways: it is contemporary and ethical, recognising the environmental damage, worsening of world hunger, and animal cruelty of much of the meat industry; it is a universal ethical voice, taking our role as a light to the nations seriously, seeing the laws of kashrut as a more detailed version of the laws given to Noah, to all humanity, to curb blood-lust, and suggesting that our rituals might impact the moral behavior of those around us; it is built on the finest academic readings of our ancient texts, those of Jacob Milgrom, readings which are sophisticated in understanding that our ancient laws are an expression of our ancient narratives and ethical values- that kashrut brings the glory of Eden and the life-saving endeavor of Noah in the ark to your kitchen.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you relate to Judaism's dietary laws? If there are aspects you observe or don't observe, why?
2. What do you think about the idea that our individual food choices are connected to ethical values? Even though the dietary laws of the Torah and the rabbis are thousands of years old, do you think their intention is important for us to consider today in the 21st century?

Session #4: The Ethics of Eating - What Does Our Tradition Ask of Us?

Treatment of Farmers and Farm Workers: Fellow Humans to whom we have Obligations

Jewish ethics state that the entire chain of production must be ethical.

You must pay out the wages due on the same day, before the sun sets, for the worker is needy and urgently depends on it
Deuteronomy 24:15

Question: if a company uses child labor or engages in wage theft in the production of beef for the Kosher market, is that beef kosher? As the consumer, what mechanisms do we use when evaluating the company from whom we are buying?

Treatment of Livestock: Living Creatures worth of Dignity

Jewish law states that livestock must be raised with dignity. We are obligated to feel our animals' breakfast before we eat our own. Animals are owed a pleasant life and quick and painless death. Inflicting pain on purpose is forbidden by the Torah.

מדברי שניהם נלמד צער בעלי חיים דאורייתא

From the statements of both of these *tanna'im* it can be learned that the requirement to prevent suffering to animals is a Torah law. Bavli Baba Metzia 32b (Sefaria)

Question: Describe the lifecycle of a farm animal, how much space does it need? How much food does it need? How should it be housed and killed?

Jew vs Non-Jew: Mixed Drinking leads to Mixed Dancing

One example of such a custom is *yayin nesekeh* – wine produced by non-Jews that is designated for use in a ritual of idol worship. Use of such wine is forbidden [to the Jew to drink] by the Torah. Extrapolating from this, the Sages forbade the wine of non-Jews for drinking or any type of enjoyment, even if it is not meant for use in idol worship – this is the principle of *stam yeynam*. However, in certain locations, rabbis relaxed part of the prohibition due to special conditions in those places. In the early Middle Ages, the rabbis forbade commerce in *stam yeynam*, and completely prohibited the use of any wine belonging to a Jew that had come into contact with a non-Jew, or the wine of a non-Jew that was taken as repayment of a debt. Yet in the sixteenth century, they permitted the use of such wine, mainly in Polish towns near the Hungarian border and in Moravian communities. The reason for this was that non-Jewish wine had become an important source of income.

From Sinai to Ethiopia Halakhah

Author: Sharon Shalom

Question: Can food become “Sanctified?” Is Kiddish Wine “transformed” by the blessing? Would you drink Communion Wine?

Bonus question: Jews are discouraged drink wine that is used in the worship by other Religions. If the wine has been “boiled” during the cooking process, it is considered too low quality for a deity to drink and therefore cannot be “sanctified.”. This wine is known as “mevushal” or “boiled.” Many Israeli wines are “mevushal.” Some Churches like to use Israeli wine. If you went to a Church and the Communion Wine used is Mevushal wine, would you drink it?