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Kol Rinah
Parashat Mishpatim
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What's your favorite Kiddush food? The Sisterhood's kugel? Bagel, lox and cream cheese? Rootbeer floats? I love Marsha Birenbaum's soups. And I miss them. And I miss having the opportunity to sit and chat with so many of you over food.

These days, since Covid, people, and just a few of them, come to shul, and then they leave. Shul is no longer much of a social experience. Per the old joke, about Moshe coming to shul to talk to God, and Yankel coming to shul to talk to Moshe, for all the Yankels out there, there's not been much time to talk to Moshe. There's not the opportunity presently to talk to God *and* talk to friends, to have a sense of a community beyond praying together in the sanctuary, especially in the way that sitting over food and drink provides.

You might think that it's just a nice custom that we (and many others) have of having Kiddush after shul, a way to get people to come, and stay. But I think there's something deeper, and downright spiritual and religious, about Kiddush. (For the record, when I use the word "Kiddush," I'm referring this morning to food after services, not to the blessing over wine.)

At the very end of this week's parasha, after a lot of mostly civil law, we have the most explicit theophany, or visible manifestation of God, in the Torah. Exodus 24:9-11 reads, "Then Moses and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel: Under God's feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. Yet God did not raise God's hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank."

"They saw God, and they ate and drank." Or to translate into our vernacular, "They went to shul and then stayed for Kiddush."

You will not be surprised to know that Jewish tradition was uncomfortable both with these folks seeing God, and also with them eating right after, and various commentators seek to read this figuratively. Onkelos, the Aramaic translator of the Torah, for example, says that rejoiced "as though they had eaten and drunk."

A classic rabbinic midrash on this (Brachot 17a) says that they were nourished by the splendor of the divine presence, rather than literally eating and drinking.

Rashi suggests that they did actually eat, but shouldn't have.

There is something to this approach. If synagogue is really for prayer, why should we raise up our souls, only to immediately give in to our more animal desires to eat, and to talk with others where we know we'll gossip? Better, safer, just to talk to God and go home on our presumed spiritual high. To make the point by exaggeration, a day at a silent meditation retreat may not be best completed by all-you-can-eat wings at a loud sports bar.

Other commentators see the eating as real, and positive. Bekhor Shor says that they ate out of joy; Ibn Ezra points out that that it says not only that they ate, but that they drank too, and he interprets drinking as drinking implying with joy. Chizkunee as well as some modern scholars (i.e. Sarna) read the eating as a part of concluding a covenant, which is, in a larger sense, what God is doing with the Israelites.

The theme with these approaches is that experiencing God's presence, and being in relationship with God, is something to celebrate, and celebrate in ways that are for us celebratory—eating and drinking. It's a recognition of gratitude as well for surviving a dangerously close encounter with the Divine, of making sure our bodies still work after our souls are so overwhelmed. For us, even at a less intense level, we can celebrate a good, successful encounter (or an attempt at an encounter) with God, and give thanks for our working bodies by eating and drinking, too.

I would even go further and say that there's something healthy and Jewish about nourishing both our souls and our bodies. Ours is not an ascetic tradition, but rather an embodied one. Experiencing holiness can happen in prayer with our hearts and minds and ears and voices, but also with our hands and mouths and tongues and stomachs and digestion. Our ability to cook, and create and mix flavors, to feed ourselves, to chew, swallow, digest, and excrete are themselves pretty miraculous and holy, and processes about which have rules and over which say blessings. God is in our prayers, but God is also in our intestines.

Moreover, we know that holiness is found in our interactions with people, in relationship, which food and time facilitate.

One final, and common reading of the Israelites' eating after their encounter with God is that they were eating the sacrifices that had been offered earlier. This is to say that eating was intrinsically connected to worship, even when Israelite worship was predominantly sacrificial. So many of the sacrifices were eaten, whether by the offerer, by the priestly officiant, or by both. After the Temple's destruction, when sacrifices ceased and prayer became their replacement, eating after prayer still made, and makes sense. Connection with God should nourish our spirits, but also our bodies.

I hope that one day soon, we will again, together, experience God's presence, and eat and drink, in joy and celebration, with gratitude, in community. That eating will not signal the end of our holy time, but rather, its continuation. Ken yehi ratzon, so may it be.

Shabbat shalom.