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Spiritual Vitamins in the Food of the Land

The purpose of remembering Jerusalem [when reciting] ‘Al naharot bavel,’ and ‘Shir hama’alot’, at every meal is in order that we yearn for the Land of Israel, in close proximity to eating. This serves to enhance the food outside the Land of Israel and brings it closer to the heights of Israel.

Even in the Land of Israel in this time, when there is a diminished holiness due the destruction [of the Temple] and there is increased physicality, in proportion, in its food - still, there remains substantial spiritual content [in the food] in proportion to the longing for the redemption, which we accentuate by [reciting] the Psalms, which introduces the Blessing of the Land and [the blessing] of ‘Rebuilding Jerusalem’ in Birkat Hamazon (The Blessing After the Meal). (Eretz Chefetz 4:10)

The notion that there is holiness found within food is an idea espoused by the kabbalists and underscored in Chassidic thought. Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski zt”l elucidates this esoteric concept:

“Chassidic writings raise the question: Inasmuch as the foods we eat provide only physical nutrients, where does the *neshama* get its nutrients? They answer that in every physical object there is a spark, a nucleus of *kedusha* and Godliness, which enables the object to exist. This nucleus of divinity that is within the food is the nutrition of the *neshama*.

Just as physical digestion is dependent on the presence of certain enzymes that convert the food into the body’s necessary building blocks, so is the absorption of the nucleus of *kedusha* that is within the food dependent on the spiritual “enzymes.” These are the *berachot* that proceed consumption of food, whereby one invokes the name of God as one thanks Him for the food. Similarly, sharing words of Torah at the table enables the *neshama* to extract the spark of *kedusha* in the food and absorb it (Visions of the Fathers, Twerski, pp. 149-150).

Evidently, Rav Kook is suggesting that reciting these chapters of Psalms at the conclusion of the meal have the ability to extract the sanctity that is embedded in Eretz Yisrael.

Perhaps an additional dimension to Rav Kook’s teaching can be found in the following explanation from Rabbi Twerski: “Chassidus teaches that retrieving the sparks of Godliness that are dispersed within the physical world hastens the ultimate Redemption of Israel. Think of it! A

person has the extraordinary power of hastening redemption by eating properly” (Ibid, p. 150).

The Source for Reciting Psalms with *Birkat Hamazon*

What is the source for the custom of reciting the Psalms, *Al Naharot Bavel* (*Tehillim* 137) and on Shabbat and Yom Tov *Shir Hamaalot* (*Tehillim* 126) before *Birkat Hamazon*?

The Zohar states (*Terumah* p.154 b) that if one derives pleasure from bread and delights in given foods, he is required to remember and worry over the sanctity of the Holy Land and over the Palace of the King which is in ruins. So on weekdays we recite, “There we sat and also wept when we remembered Zion.” On Shabbos and Yom Tov when it is prohibited to openly display grief, we say a joyful psalm instead: “When Hashem returned the captivity of Zion, we were as dreamers” (*Shelah*, p. 82b).

The Zohar is suggesting that we read these verses to temper our joy by remembering the loss of the Temple. Rav Kook, however, seems to emphasize something different. He sees the positive effect in reading these Psalms. When we concentrate on the Land while engaging in eating we ennoble the act of eating - and amazingly, we even elevate the spiritual content of food itself. The result is bonding with the spiritual quality inherent in the Land simply by reciting words that focus on the Land.

A Halacha Regarding Sparks of Kedusha Found in Food

The *Tur* specifies the correct text that should be recited following the consumption of the seven species of the Land of Israel (*Tur, Orach Chaim* 208). He states that the

words: *ve'nisboa mituva* וְנִשְׂבַּע מִטּוּבָה (to be sated with its goodness) should be omitted from the blessing of *Al Hamichya*. This phrase connotes that we are eating only in order to enjoy the pleasure of the Land's food. This emphasis, suggests the *Tur*, has no place in the blessing. Perhaps the *Tur* is alluding to the Talmud (*Sota* 14b) where it notes that Moshe's desire to enter the Land was *not* for the purpose of enjoying its sustenance. Why should we make mention that the food is tasty when that is not our focus?

The commentary of the *Bach* counters and suggests that this phrase is indeed correct because it does not relate to the physical nourishment or superior cuisine in the Land but rather to the sparks of Godliness found in its produce. This message, he argues, should certainly be highlighted in the blessing. It is noteworthy that it is our practice today to include the words “to be sated with its goodness.”

The legendary Chatam Sofer suggests that the Torah's praise of Israel as being a “Land flowing with milk and honey” is actually meant to underscore the spiritual content found in all the produce in the Land of Israel. We use a similar expression to describe the sweetness of the Torah - “Honey and milk under her tongue” (*Song of Songs* 4:11). The concept that holiness is found in the food is hinted at in the following way: The final letters (*sofei tevot*) of the words - *zvat chalav u'devash* זֶבֶת חָלָב וּדְבַשׁ spell the word Shabbat. The Chatam Sofer concludes: ‘Partaking of the food of Israel is compared to partaking of a Shabbat meal’ (*Chatam Sofer, Chiddushim on Chullin*, 71b). ■