

Sanctifying the Senses III:
“Sustain me with raisin cakes; Refresh me with apples”
(Genesis 2:9, 15-17; 3:1-22; Song of Songs 2:1-5)

My colleague, Reverend Joanne Sanders can regale you with stories attesting to my woeful ignorance about sports. But uncharacteristically, I remember with great clarity the Major League Baseball strike in the mid-90s when I was a congregational rabbi in Alameda. People were trying to find a way to fill the Oakland Coliseum when the A’s were striking. Someone suggested a baseball game among rivals—what if the priests took on the rabbis? The clergy, with histories of playing little league and fantasies of playing in the big leagues, loved the idea. It was scarcely an even playing field—the priests brought in some young ringers—athletes from local Catholic high schools, and as you can imagine—the middle-aged rabbis lost in a rout. But we figured we won the moral victory—first, we had a woman rabbi on our team—something the priests couldn’t claim, and second, we had a uniform. All the rabbis were wearing tee shirts and hats from Hebrew National with their famous slogan, “We answer to a higher authority.”

“We answer to a higher authority.” This was not only the catchphrase of an inspired advertising campaign to expand the customer base for kosher hot dogs; it was also an association that had resonance. It resonated because we recognize that food can uplift us or diminish us. What we place in our mouths becomes part of who we are. What we taste can sacrifice or sanctify the spirit.

The tradition of tasting or refraining from tasting food is a spiritual discipline practiced by most religious traditions. The month of Ramadan began this week. Its most identifiable practice is abstaining from food during daylight hours—Muslims observing Ramadan eat before dawn and after nightfall. During Lent, Christians give up some desirable foods to control their passions and free their souls for prayer. Buddhist monks and Hindu sadhus fast regularly. On Yom Kippur, Jews do not eat or drink from sundown to sundown to atone for our own and our community’s sins, and to seek compassion from God, the true Judge.

In the bible, fasting is not only a spiritual act, but a catalyst for doing justice as well. On Yom Kippur, we hear the prophet Isaiah chastising the Israelites for refraining from food while partaking in oppression, “Is this the fast that I have

chosen?” He asks, then continues “No, this is the fast that I desire...To let the oppressed go free...to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin.” (Isaiah 58:6-7)

When I was a Hillel rabbi, I looked forward to our annual December conventions with rabbinic colleagues who worked on campus. In the early years, we would gather from all over the country at Grossinger’s. Grossinger’s was one of many hotels in the Catskills in upstate New York, an area known as the “Borscht Belt”, the Jewish answer to the Bible Belt. My friend Merle Feld, remembers, “We were a passionate bunch—the only group ever to come to the most famous of the Borscht Belt hotels and stage a hunger strike protesting their obscene waste of food while famine raged abroad.”ⁱ We knew, in our *kiskes*, literally in our intestines, that food was mixed with justice.

For Mahatma Gandhi, fasting was “the sincerest form of prayer”. His well-publicized fasts were not only for personal spiritual benefit but also to influence his own followers to renew their commitment to nonviolence when they had taken to violence. Growing up a practicing Catholic, Cesar Chavez engaged in several fasts when he led the United Farmworkers Union. When he ended a 21-day fast in 1968, Chavez explained, “ “I undertook this fast because my heart was filled with grief and pain for the sufferings of the farm workers. The fast was first for me and then for all of us in this union. It was a fast for nonviolence and a call to sacrifice.” Tasting, and not tasting food can be a call for justice.

Sometimes, refusing food is the last refuge of those who have little or no control over their lives. For much of this week, inmates in California prisons have been engaged in a hunger strike to call attention to prisoners who spend 23 hours a day in solitary confinement in an 8 X 10’ cell. And they are not the only ones. For months, prisoners in Guantanamo have been force fed in response to their refusal to eat. Colonel Morris Davis, the former chief prosecutor at Guantanamo said, “It’s regrettable that it’s taking them putting their lives at risk to get us to pay attention, that they’ve been cleared for transfer, yet they’re still in prison...”ⁱⁱ These fasts are to awaken the conscience of others.

Haviva Ner-David is a pioneer—she is one of the first women to study for rabbinic ordination in the Orthodox community. She is no stranger to battling the status quo. But her early battles were with herself— as an adolescent, she was anorexic. She starved herself. She writes, “My struggle with food was

about control. [During] a summer in camp, I had a taste of what it would be like to be free to make my own decisions, to explore my spirituality and religious expression on my own terms...I knew that after camp I would be returning home to what I saw as a suffocating life...I felt closed in, restricted, controlled, chained, and I wanted to be free. So I grasped at the one thing that I knew only I could control: food.”ⁱⁱⁱ

But if refusing to be fed can be construed, paradoxically and imperfectly, as an act of liberation, feeding another, showering another with that which is good to taste is an even more profound act of affirmation.

“Sustain me with raisin cakes; Refresh me with apples,” the lover in Song of Songs asks. How often are we sustained not simply physically, but emotionally with a warmly remembered taste, with a swirl of connections between food, family and friendship?

Every week for over forty years, Frida Davidson baked braided egg bread, or challah, for Friday night Shabbat dinners. One of her five kids would inevitably declare, “Mom, this is the best challah you have ever made,” and the family would laugh, knowing that every challah was made exactly the same, and each week, it was truly wonderful. Six months after celebrating the 50 years of marriage to her husband Ray, Frida died. In one of his darkest days of mourning, Ray, a novice in the kitchen, spied her recipe box and thought it would bring him close to Frida if he baked her challah. Much to his surprise, it actually tasted like her challah. Ray brought Frida’s challah to his synagogue and before he knew it, a commercial mixer and two volunteer assistants later, he was baking 64 loaves a week as a fundraiser for the congregation.

A few years later, he moved to be closer to one of his daughters. A newcomer to town, Ray kept baking challahs. He baked for the senior center and he baked for the pre-school. He baked for the high holidays. At age 86, Ray says, “I love sharing the memory of the best person to ever come into my life with so many others... The volunteers who have joined me in doing this holy work have been a godsend as well. They have become my friends and have extended invitations to join them at Shabbat dinners in their homes where I have learned to know and to love them and their families. Even more importantly, they have come to know Frida through my eyes!”^{iv} Surely, in addition to the eggs, flour, sugar and yeast, they taste his love and devotion for Frida in every bite.

Last year, Stanford Law School honored civil rights activist and attorney Vernon Jordan with a lifetime award for public service. In accepting the award,

he told an unforgettable story about tasting love and devotion in an unexpected meal.

In 1960, shortly after he completed law school, he and two other NAACP lawyers went to a small rural segregated Georgia town to represent an 18 year old black man who had been arrested, arraigned indicted, tried, convicted and sentenced to die in the electric chair—all within the space of 48 hours. The courthouse was segregated. The nearest motel where they could sleep was 30 miles away. For lunch, the white lawyers walked across the street to the white only café. The three black lawyers went to the grocery store and bought fixings for baloney sandwiches, which they ate in their car parked on the courthouse square.

On the 3rd day of the trial, a black woman sitting upstairs in the colored section dropped a book—and got Mr. Jordan’s attention. She beckoned him to the vestibule of courthouse, where she said that she’d been watching the lawyers eat those baloney sandwiches and invited them to come to her home for lunch.

Mr. Jordan remembers, “When we arrived, we saw a beautiful sight. A table set for royalty, her best silver, her best china, her best crystal, her best lace tablecloth, beautifully folded white cloth napkins, and before us was the most exquisite southern cuisine I’ve ever eaten. Ten black women and their husbands joined us for lunch. But before we sat down to eat, we joined hands, where our hostess’ husband said the blessing. I shall never forget one sentence in that prayer.

“Lord, way down here in Tattnall County, we can’t join the NAACP. But thanks to your bountiful blessings, we can feed the NAACP lawyers.”

He repeated that blessing—a blessing taking on fresh resonance this weekend—as if the taste of that meal was still in his mouth.

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Mr. Jordan went on to reflect that he’s been well compensated throughout his career as an attorney, but nothing compared, as he said, “with the gift that I received 8 weeks after law school from those humble, kind and generous black men and women in Tattnall County in the summer of 1960. It has been the best legal fee of my career.”

“Sustain me with raisin cakes; refresh me with apples. For I am faint with love.” The love of justice, the generosity of spirit, the unending hospitality contained in the taste of that meal has sustained and refreshed this activist for over five decades of working to make this nation a more perfect union. What we taste is not simply fuel for the body; it can also be energy for the spirit. Our sense of taste can be sanctified.

The Jewish mystic Isaac Luria teaches, “Do not imagine that God wants you to eat for mere pleasure or to fill your body. No, the purpose is mending...the Torah teaches, “One does not live on bread alone, but rather on all that issues from the mouth of God.” When you ask, “What is it that I am tasting?” the answer is, “These are the holy sparks from the sublime holy worlds that are within the food and drink.”^v

“The purpose is mending.”

Surely, Vernon Jordan tasted those holy sparks as he endeavors to mend our torn social fabric. Surely holiness was the secret ingredient in Ray’s challahs, as sharing it with others helped him to mend his grieving heart.

But what holy sparks, what mending was hidden in our very first taste as human beings? What was sacred in the apple or fig or pomegranate—that Adam and Eve ate in the Garden of Eden? The text tells us: “When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to the man and he ate.”

When Adam and Eve ate the fruit, they tasted knowledge. Eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil became the means by which Adam and Eve, and by extension, we as their progeny, imbibed moral distinctions, distinctions they had been incapable of making before taking the fruit, replete with both sweetness and wisdom.

I like to think that eating the fruit itself was not the test of Adam and Eve’s morality—after all, what parent doesn’t know that emphasizing just one restriction makes it the most desirable thing on the planet! Maybe the true test was that, after eating the fruit, after understanding the capacity to do good and to do evil, Adam and Eve’s first response was to hide from their own culpability. Their first response was to blame one another. Their first response was to run away from God. “Ayeka?” “Where are you?” God asks.

We are the descendants of Adam and Eve. Where are we? We have the capacity to distinguish good from evil. We can taste justice and savor love. We can taste conviction and absorb holy sparks. Will our food be fuel for doing good in the world? Will what we taste lead us to bless our bounty and enable others to share in it? When we taste, let our food and drink be for mending. May we be sustained with raisin cakes and refreshed with apples. May what we taste sanctify our spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Merle Feld, *A Spiritual Life* p. 31

ⁱⁱ

http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2013/7/11/as_hunger_strike_continues_ex_c_hief_guantanamo_prosecutor_says_no_good_reason_to_keep_prison_open

ⁱⁱⁱ Haviva Ner David, *Life on the Fringes*, p. 130-131

^{iv} Nancy Rips, *High HolyDay Stories*, p 48-58

^v Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah*, p. 140-150