

God in the kitchen

Jackie Tabick

Food, glorious food!

WHEN MY COUSIN WAS IN THE ARMY, during the Second World War, she woke up one morning to the smell of frying bacon. Mouth salivating, she went to the mess.

‘Bacon and eggs please.’

‘Cohen,’ yelled the mess sergeant, ‘if there’s one thing I know about Jews, I know this: they can’t eat bacon on Saturdays.’ And, to my cousin’s great disappointment, she plonked only eggs on the plate.

When I was acting as the Jewish advisor for a television series, I had terrible trouble convincing them (indeed, to be truthful, I failed) that when visitors pop in to an average Jewish home they are far more likely to be greeted by the words, ‘How about a cup of tea and a piece of cake?’ than by ‘Would you like a drink?’

Because it is true, we enjoy our food. Indeed, many on the margin will define themselves as gastronomic Jews; that is, their attachment to Judaism is through chopped liver and chicken soup, rather than through any ritual or theological stance.

God, even in the kitchen

But anyone who stops there has of course missed the point, for Judaism is not defined through the kitchen: rather, we seek to find God everywhere, *even* in the kitchen. In our morning prayers, we refer to ‘the miracles that are daily with us’. The system of blessings imposed by the rabbis of the Mishnaic period is designed to ensure that we take nothing for granted, but that we develop what the modern philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel has called a state of ‘radical amazement’. No action is to be considered just routine. Not waking in the morning. Not going to the toilet. Certainly not eating and drinking. Each action is to be preceded by a blessing, a statement that arouses the sense of the ineffable. The seemingly trivial becomes religious.

As Heschel wrote, ‘This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living: to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things’.¹

The unity of creation

The vital element is to remember that behind the individual actions is a unity that is greater than we are, greater than our individual actions. One of the greatest benefits that has come to us from the modern scientific world are the insights from the study of ecology, for they have taught us that behind the wonderful diversity that we witness around us, there is the unity of creation. And behind that unity, we Jews see the one God, the Creator of all. And the rhythms that we impose upon our days, weeks, years, indeed upon the span of our very life, remind us of that ultimate unity.

This is the reason why so many Jews are today so disappointed by the lack of spirituality they feel when they come into contact with Judaism. For their contacts are often so disjointed. They visit the synagogue for the great High Holy Days² and expect instant revelation of forgiveness. Instead they find boredom. Or they sit through a Seder,³ and cannot wait for the meal. Or they find the rituals of death quite incomprehensible; the superstitions such as covering mirrors, originally to prevent the souls of the departed becoming trapped in the reflection, become the vital acts, assuming an importance out of all proportion to the life-cycle event.

Everything has to fit into the coherent whole; that is what gives us the richness we seek.

Time . . . the 'Star Trek' effect

Our life is ruled by time. The millennium celebrations do not let us forget that! But as a Jew, my time is ruled by another calendar. And we have to work at juggling the demands made by both.

Even the small differences are important. Our day begins at sunset. We don't have to wait till the bewitching hour to start a festival! On the eve of a Sabbath or festival we experience what I, as a science fiction fan, call the 'Star Trek' effect. I rush in from synagogue; the family is busy with their own activities. The television is usually still on. Over that noise our son is playing the piano. I bustle like mad about the kitchen finishing off our dinner. After a few hectic and rather tense moments we gather round the table. And my daughter and I light the candles.

It is as if we have been transported to another world. Suddenly, we have time for each other. My husband recites the kiddush, the prayer that sanctifies the day, and blesses the children and pays tribute to my contribution to the family in the words from the book of Proverbs: 'A woman of worth, who can find her? Her price is far above rubies.'⁴

And, as a family, often with guests, we can sit and talk about our week, our plans, sometimes even about what has been learnt about the reading for the Sabbath day. The Sabbath peace has arrived and normal activities, shopping, writing, cooking, spending money, cease until three stars have appeared in the sky on the Saturday evening.

Then the process is reversed. Again we use candles and wine.⁵ though this time we add the sweet smell of the spices to remind our Sabbath souls that a return visit will be worth it next week! And as we sing farewell to the peace we have enjoyed, so the computers go back on, the phone starts ringing and the mad hectic lifestyle we all seem to endure these days begins again.

But Shabbat does not just begin at sunset on Friday. If we left preparations until then, how could we enjoy the day? The whole week is built around it; from what shall we eat? (Food again!) What visitors shall we invite? To when can we shop? Cook? And organize ourselves so we can be free to enjoy? Not only that. The Torah reading on the Sabbath is so much more meaningful if it has been studied in advance. And even prayer needs daily practice. *Especially* prayer needs daily practice. We cannot expect the Sabbath prayers to have meaning without the daily spiritual workout.

In the Mishnah we are told, 'The pious men of old used to wait an hour before they said The Prayer, that they might direct their hearts toward God'.⁶

And in the Hassidic literature we are told, 'The Tzanzer was asked by a Chassid: "What does the Rabbi do before praying?" "I pray", was the reply, "that I may be able to pray properly"'.⁷

And if the Sabbath relies on preparation, physical and spiritual, to take place on the working days of the week, so the festivals rely on the Sabbaths and each other to make a meaningful and coherent whole.

The autumn manoeuvres

Our year begins in the autumn, with Rosh Hashanah. But preparations begin much earlier. The liturgical calendar begins to prepare us a whole month before, the special prophetic readings, taken from the book of Isaiah, are heady and full of the excitement of the call to return to God, we include the blowing of the shofar into our daily worship, and a week before, we assemble in the synagogue late on a Saturday evening, for the penitential prayers.⁸ This is a solemn yet joyful service. For what more joyful task can we perform for our God then getting rid of the rubbish from our lives? We are like workmen, sweeping the

courtyard of the king, gathering the rubbish and throwing it into the pits outside the town.

The kitchen smells of good food. Honey is brought, so we can dip apples into the sweet substance and pray for a sweet New Year. In our family, we save the best apple from our tree for the ritual. Food has to be prepared, most again cooked in honey, even the chicken! Cards and calls are received and sent. And decisions about the level of charitable covenants are made, and new covenants signed. For what is the use of praying for forgiveness, if we have not made arrangements to help the vulnerable?

The days are spent in synagogue and in feasting with friends and family. In the afternoon, we go together and symbolically throw our sins away in the running water of a local stream, meeting other families as we go.⁹ It feels like the whole community is on the move. And even strangers greet each other; we are instantly recognizable, in our good clothes and carrying prayer books and bags of stale bread to throw for the ducks or fish.

Linking the New Year and the most important day of the calendar, the Day for Atonement, are the Ten Days of Penitence. We always joke that the congregations my husband and I serve are obviously free from sin, for the smallest congregations of the year attend services on the Sabbath in those ten days. Perhaps they are suffering from prayer fatigue! And during this period we try to apologize to those we have hurt or harmed and make suitable amends, for if we have not accepted responsibility for our sins, and done something positive to alleviate the harm they have brought upon us and those around us, then how can we ask God to forgive us? And the greeting changes, from Happy New Year, to 'May the final sealing be good'.¹⁰

Then comes the fast, and from three or four years old the children are involved. They learn that the adults are fasting, so they must be good. And sweets are not allowed even for the youngest, so they too should understand the solemnity of the day. And like the adults, leather shoes are not worn, in the hope that just as we show mercy on the animals, so God will show mercy to us.

As we finish our meal before the fast, the table is cleared and books are placed upon it. For once, the kitchen is closed. A very heavy statement in any Jewish house! For twenty-five hours, those who are physically capable of the act will abstain from all food and drink. We need to concentrate just on our prayers and pray for forgiveness for our sins. We spend the majority of the day in synagogue, and you always know if the day has been good. During the middle of the afternoon, time

becomes meaningless, it is with a sense of shock that you suddenly realize that only an hour remains, your voice becomes stronger, the prayers and the music become ever more urgent. Then the final shofar blast¹¹ shatters the mood, and joyful shouts of Happy New Year are heard again.

But we are not ready to break the fast until we begin preparations for the next festival, of Succot.¹² Before we sit down to eat, my husband makes the first move to putting up our Succah – he brings in the toolkit! Minimalist, but a start! I feel incredibly sorry for those who limit their observance to the New Year and the Day for Atonement. They see such a lopsided view of Judaism, cerebral, solemn, castigating us for our sins of commission and omission. They miss the fun and the joy.

Succot is the time of rejoicing. After all the intellectual activities of Atonement, out comes the wood and the hammer and up goes our temporary shelter. All the family help, in the building or the decorations. And I would hate to miss the annual attempt, dressed in our coats, to drink soup that is minute by minute being diluted by the pouring rain! There is a real sense of physical pride if the Succah stays up. The wonderful pleasures of sight and smell and taste as you stand in the Succah. And the strange daily waving of the Lulav (consisting of willow, myrtle, palm and citron), when we remember the world and the need for rain, made stranger by the fact that in this country, we usually have already had too much of the stuff. This year, I told the young people to think, 'Africa, India and Israel', as they waved the branches in all the directions of the compass.

And the month concludes with sheer manic joy at Simchat Torah¹³ as we conclude the reading of the scrolls and immediately begin again. The throwing of sweets, the dancing and singing, the waving of flags and consumption of alcohol, all valid expressions of a different kind of spirituality. The love of God and his revelation as expressed in the Torah becomes a reality around us. The month moves from solemnity to joy, from adult-centred festivals to all family-events, just as life contains all these elements, all one unity.

Winter lights and difficulties of identity

The minute Simchat Torah finishes, our youngest begins his personal preparations for Chanukah:¹⁴ the writing of his wish list! The mid-winter is a difficult time for those of us out of step with the secular calendar. Everywhere we turn, from the beginning of November, Christmas confronts us. No wonder that the really unimportant festival of Chanukah has suddenly grown in popularity. Every night, we light

candles. Our candlesticks have been made by the children over the years and we consume hundreds of candles over the week. We say the prayers, always enjoying our traditional argument over which version we should use, the one in our prayer books or the one the children learnt at school. (The advantage and disadvantage of sending them to Jewish Day Schools is that they know enough to argue!) And they get presents. Every night in the week!

The festival talks of the tiny light that survives in the midst of great darkness; the fight for the retention of a separate identity in a culture that is so wonderfully attractive and benign. The clash of time and calendars and tastes. Will latkes¹⁵ and donuts, the traditional food of the festival, win, or will it be Christmas puddings and mince pies?

It is winter. It is cold and bleak, but our minds turn to trees and the benefits they bring to our world. A chance to show our young that Judaism can be relevant and also talk ecology. Minor the festival might be,¹⁶ but such fun to try and consume fifteen types of fruit that grows on trees over the course of the day. Our table groans under the bowl of fruit that has pride of place. And of course, a chance to remind ourselves of the link with Israel as we collect money to buy trees to be planted in the Land.

Then, just as winter seems to be unending and the darkness unrelenting, we break into the madness of Mardi Gras and the celebration of Purim.¹⁷ I start working for Purim from the previous Hallowe'en, when various items for dressing up begin to appear in the shops. I add to the collection over Christmas and this year I am the proud owner of a large yellow hand, bearing the words, 'Boo, Hiss', bought during a visit to the Pantomime. Such early preparations are vital for that awful moment when we have to decide, how shall we dress for the festivities? Over the years, I have become a dab hand at making costumes, and sometimes my children have demanded two, one for synagogue, the other for school. Last year, I was a chocolate mousse, complete with a moose hat! My husband wore the loudest jacket imaginable, bought in a charity shop, and a revolving bow tie. And that was just the adults! The fun, of course, hides the real message of the story: the ever-present danger of anti-Semitism, indeed of prejudice of all kinds. But like all good jokes, the serious message is disguised to alleviate our distress. And we conceal our fears of what may happen in society as we drown out the name of Haman with our rattles and our boos.

The great spring-clean, of house and soul

Purim also marks the beginning of preparations for Pesach.¹⁸ It means I have one month to run down all the food in my cupboards and freezer, clean the house from top to bottom, buy in the Pesach foods and prepare myself spiritually for the celebration of the Passover.

Suddenly, the house is filled with the aroma of cakes and biscuits as I try desperately to use up the flour in constructive ways. And the children and my husband are press-ganged into the cleaning routine. Actually, help is always willingly given. They look forward to Pesach and understand that the better the preparation, the more they will enjoy. Little notices begin to appear on rooms upstairs and then cupboard doors in the kitchen, 'No hametz (leavened dough) Zone!' And as we clean the rooms, so we try to search our souls for the dirt left by our unthinking and uncaring ways.

The day leading up to the Seder is just crazy. The previous night, all the normal crockery and cooking utensils, except those we will need for breakfast, are locked away or carted out to the garage. My husband and the children search the house with the palm branch left from Succot in one hand, and a torch in the other. (Traditionally a candle is used, but I long ago decided I could not cope with the fire risk!) They are looking for ten pieces of bread that I have carefully concealed around the house and I just hope they don't find more. If they do, then my cleaning is at fault.

The next day, breakfast is hurried, the bread taken out and burnt in the garden and then the lounge has to be transformed into a dining room for up to thirty people, a mixture of family, friends and always some strangers. There is an incredible feeling when you cook that day: all packets of food are new, the Pesach crockery reappears like old long-lost friends, and there is always the clock to beat.

The Seder, meal and service combined, is one of the great joys of the year, when history and theology are literally eaten and tasted: the bread of poverty, the bitterness of slavery, the freshness of spring and freedom. All generations have a part to play. My husband challenges our children to find questions for him from the text. They take this very seriously and begin the hunt weeks in advance. Then there are the friendly 'battles' over tunes, and the serious debates over, 'What constitutes slavery in our lives at this moment?' And, 'Are we free?' Certainly, as I survey the mess left by Matza crumbs that are trailed over the house, and remember the frenzy of cleaning that had left the house sparkling just hours before the festival, a new understanding of

slavery and servitude burgeons within me and I feel so sorry for the slaves!

During the weeks that follow, two new festivals have entered the year. We first remember the victims of the Holocaust, lighting six memorial candles for the six million, reading books and poems that tell the story, and then, a few days later, celebrate the birth of the state of Israel. What a contrast in emotions that has to be dealt with! But over and above these new festive days is the counting that links the Passover with the festival of Weeks,¹⁹ for freedom must be grounded in responsibility, we have to accept the duties that arise from revelation.

Shavuot is very much a synagogue festival, with a night spent in study and then the joyful acceptance of the Ten Commandments in the morning service. But even here, food plays a part, for we eat milky foods, especially cheesecake and blintzes, to remind ourselves that in the face of so much learning, we are little more than children who have to be sustained by milk.

And in the heat of the summer, the holiday season, the final confrontation between the two calendars, for amid the pleasure of sandcastles and sea, we observe the fast day of the Ninth of Av,²⁰ when we recall the horrors of war and the terrors of the forced eviction of our people from the Land of Israel,²¹ and so empathize with the victims of such horrors today. In our family, it is the custom to donate the money we would have spent on our food that day to a charity that helps the victims of war.

And then begin the preparations for the New Year, and the cycle begins again.

Life events

On top of this natural and yearly cycle is the more personal cycle of life events, of birth, adolescence, marriage and death. And these too find their place in our homes as well as our synagogues. Like Sabbaths and festivals, the communal and home rituals are intertwined.

Providing all is well, our boys are circumcised at eight days in our homes, among our friends and relatives. In the Progressive traditions, special prayers follow this for both sons and daughters in the synagogue, when both parents and baby are called up before the Holy Ark to give thanks. In Orthodox synagogues, only the father is called to the Torah to say a blessing. The occasion is often marked by the giving of Kiddush cups to the babies, in preparation for their future participation in family rites on festivals and Sabbaths.

Apart from the inevitable feasting, bar and bat Mitzvah ceremonies²² and weddings take place very much in the synagogue. Though weddings can take place in our homes and gardens, usually they do not, for lack of room and formality.

But apart from the actual funeral, the rituals surrounding death are very much attached to our homes. After the funeral, a week of mourning begins. When the mourners return from the cemetery, a meal of consolation awaits them, eggs and round-shaped foods, a symbol of the continuity of life. Each day, a congregation gathers for daily services to be held at the house of mourning. In between, visitors come and chat to the mourners about the deceased. Food is provided by other family members and by friends. It is a chance for the mourners to talk, to cry and to be surrounded by love and support, a reminder that they are not alone.

The little sanctuary

No wonder that the home is referred to in some modern works as 'the little sanctuary'. It is not merely a place to sleep and rest, it is a holy place where rituals and ethical teachings determine the layout of the kitchen, the contents of the bookshelves and the way time is used within its walls. In it and through it links are made to our past, to our synagogues and institutions of learning and caring now, and, hopefully, to our future.

When the prophet Micah says, 'It hath been told thee, O man,' he assumes that everyone knows about God. With this knowledge every man is capable of undertaking the duty of a priest, which is to create a place where sanctity reigns. Man needs a holy place; a man needs holiness. The priest must create such a place, be it a temple or a synagogue, or the home where the family lives.²³

We are told that the windows in the Temple in Jerusalem were so organized that rather than letting light into the building, the holy light would flow out into the world. In our morning daily prayer we thank God for 'renewing the wonders of creation'. Every day, every place, carries within it the potentiality of holiness. It is up to us to find the time and place to allow it into our lives.

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NOTES

For a fuller account of the festivals I would recommend Arthur Waskow, *Seasons of our joy* (Beacon Press, 1982) or *Gates of the seasons* (Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1983). For life-cycle events try *Celebration and renewal*, ed. Rela M. Geffen (The Jewish Publication Society, 1993), or any one of numerous specialist books.

1 *Between man and God: an interpretation of Judaism. From the writings of Abraham J. Heschel*, selected, edited and introduced by Fritz A. Rothschild (New York: The Free Press, 1959), p 43.

2 The High Holy Days consist of Rosh Hashanah, the New Year and Yom Kippur, the Day for Atonement. They take place in the early autumn.

3 The Seder is the special meal that begins the festival of Passover, or Pesach. It is a festive meal that is surrounded by prayer, song and the telling of the Exodus story.

4 Proverbs 31:10–31.

5 The Havdalah, or ‘Separation’ ceremony.

6 *Ber.* V:1.

7 Quoted in *Forms of prayer* (London: The Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, 1977).

8 Selichot.

9 Tashlich.

10 This refers to the notion that God makes entries into the Book of Life on the New Year concerning our future, based on our spiritual and ethical standards, but the entry is not sealed and finished until the end of Yom Kippur, to give us the chance to repent and so annul any severe decree.

11 Made from a ram’s horn.

12 Tabernacles, the harvest festival when we build and live in booths erected in our gardens.

13 Rejoicing of the Teaching, when we finish the book of Deuteronomy and immediately begin the book of Genesis.

14 Dedication, the festival of lights around the middle to end of December.

15 Potato pancakes, cooked in oil to remind us of the miracle of the one day’s oil that lasted for eight.

16 Tu Bishvat, the 15th of Shevat.

17 Literally ‘Lots’, a reminder of the lots thrown by our arch-enemy Haman in the book of Esther, to determine the day on which all the Jews of the Persian Empire should be killed.

18 Passover.

19 The counting of the Omer, in Temple times the grain offering, now a calendar exercise over forty-nine days to heighten our expectations for the coming holiday of Shavuot, of Weeks, when we remember the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai.

20 Tisha bee’s.

21 In 586 BCE by the Babylonians and again in 70 CE by the Romans.

22 Literally, son or daughter of the Commandments, ceremonies that take place at the age of thirteen.

23 From Ignaz Maybaum, *The faith of the Jewish diaspora* (Vision, 1962). Knowing Rabbi Maybaum, I am sure that these days he would have included women in his statement!