



Eating Holy Food in a Holy Way

Rabbi Julian Sinclair, Parshat Vayechi

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Do we know who grows our food? Does it matter?

This question was first raised for me five years ago when I was the Campus Rabbi at England’s Cambridge University. Invited to High Table dinner with the professors at one of the colleges, I was surprised to discover that most of the conversation among some of Britain’s leading minds revolved around the food.

“This venison’s inedible,” complained an irascible professor of physics.

“Absolutely,” agreed an elderly Nobel Laureate. “We had a cook here in the seventies who would never serve an animal he didn’t know personally.”

“Quite right too.”

As I smugly ate my triple-plastic wrapped kosher airline meal, the idea of having a relationship that is in any way personal with one’s food or the people who grow it seemed quaintly ridiculous. However, the preeminent Torah commentator Rashi on this week’s Torah portion of Vayechi suggests otherwise.

When Jacob on his deathbed blesses his sons, he highlights characteristics that are unique to each of them and to the tribes of their descendants. According to Rashi, five of these blessings focus on the agricultural specificity of each tribe’s territory in the Land of Israel.

For example, in Judah’s (*Yehuda*) blessing, “Binding his foal to the vine...he washes his garments in wine,”¹ Rashi comments based on the Midrash, “It was prophesied about the Land of Yehuda that it will gush forth wine like a fountain.”²

On the promise, “Zevulun shall dwell at the edge of the sea. His will be a shore for ships...”³ Rashi remarks, “He will always be found on the shores by the ports to which ships bring merchandise.”⁴

¹ Gen. 49:11

² *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* 98:9; Rashi Gen. 49:11, s.v. *osri lagefen iryo*

³ Gen. 49:13

Similarly, interpreting the blessing to Issachar, “He saw a resting place, that it was good, and the land that it was pleasant,”⁵ Rashi writes, “He saw that his part of the land was blessed and would produce good fruit.”⁶ Issachar, whose tribe’s destiny was traditionally understood as immersion in Torah learning, rejoiced in a portion where ready-to-eat food grew in abundance and devotion to study would be practical.

Other rabbinical sources underscore this point. The Talmud Megillah tells how the beaches of Zevulun were home to the molluscs from which techelet dye could be extracted.⁷ His territory was agriculturally poor but a lucrative resource for snail-farming. The Talmud Ketubot also abounds in sensuous descriptions of the grapes and wine grown in the lands of Yehuda: “Any palate that tastes it says, ‘Give me! Give me!’”⁸

Two points stand out from Rashi’s comments. Firstly Biblical food production is regional. Each part of the Land of Israel is known for the particular kinds of crop and produce native to it. Secondly, it *is* personal. We know that the members of the tribe of Yehuda grow our grapes, those in Asher make olive oil, those in Issachar harvest fruit, etc. A biblical Jew could, if he or she chose, easily trace the short and transparent journey of each item from the ground, via the grower, to their plates.

It is challenging for contemporary suburban Jews to find any relevance in these notions. We buy our industrially produced and packaged food in supermarkets that are identical from Brooklyn to Brookline and from Skokie to Silver Spring. Contemporary Western eaters have lost any connection to the people who grow their food or the place where it is grown. (The typical item of food on an American dinner plate has traveled 1500 miles.)⁹

Does this matter? Michael Pollan, in his influential book *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, argues that it matters very much. Pollan claims that the industrial food chain relies on a thick veil of ignorance being cast between us and the process of production. From meat raised in CAFO’s (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations), to methane-belching corn-fed cattle, to the raising of monoculture fruits, vegetables and grains, to the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides on our produce, we simply do not want to know too much about how what we eat arrives on the supermarket shelves.

If we were fully aware of the cruelty frequently involved in raising our food, the environmental degradation caused by growing it, the health risks to consumers in processing and preserving it, and the immense expenditure of fossil fuels in transporting it, we would be troubled, if not repulsed. Pollan’s disturbing achievement is to rip away the veil of ignorance and rub our faces in the raw facts about our food.

How should we exercise the ethical responsibility that comes with knowledge about the sources of our food? Pollan writes about Polyface Farm, a pesticide and fertilizer free farm where the animals are all

⁴ Rashi, Ge n. 49:13, s.v. *vihu...lichof aniyot*

⁵ Gen. 49:15

⁶ Rashi, Gen. 49:15, s.v. *vayar minucha ki tov*

⁷ Talmud Bavli Megillah 6b

⁸ Talmud Bavli Ketubot 111b

⁹ Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, New York, Penguin, 2006. p.239

free-range. Its owner, Joel Salatin believes, “The only meaningful guarantee of integrity is when buyers and sellers can look one another in the eye.” Knowing the people who grow our food, we can take a measure of responsibility for how it reaches us.

How can urbanites living thirty miles from the nearest farm possibly do this? One small way is through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects. City-dwellers subscribe at the beginning of the growing season, pay a few hundred dollars and receive a box of produce each week. Hazon’s pioneering *Tuv Ha’Aretz* (whose name means “the best of the land”) supports a dozen farms across the United States and one in Israel, making it the first Jewish CSA scheme.¹⁰ It is based on the conviction that that in addition to the laws of *kashrut*, we also need to consider the full range of ethical issues involved in our food’s production.

Rashi’s description of a localized, personal agriculture may serve as a model for how to grope our way back from the tortured complexity of the industrial food chain towards a healthier relationship with what we eat. Maybe the crusty Cambridge professors were right: the degradation of our food is a worthy subject of conversation for anyone’s dinner table.

Suggested Action Items:

1. Join a Community Supported Agriculture project near your home. Check out these links for more information:
<http://www.hazon.org/go.php?q=/food/CSA/aboutTuvHa'Aretz.html>
http://www.hazon.org/go.php?q=/food/CSA/why_CSA.html#moreinfo
2. Learn about the local farms and food producers near you and buy from them directly — you might find not too far from you is a wonderful cheesemaker, a delicious jam producer or an organic peach and berry farm where you can pick your own fruit!
3. Attempt to buy food that is grown or produced locally, with as little packaging and transportation as possible involved in the process.
4. Say the appropriate blessings over food with an intention of healing for yourself and for the world.

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¹⁰ Visit www.hazon.org to learn more about Hazon and Tuv Ha’Aretz.