Torah from JTS

Re-eh 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Charlie Schwartz, director of Digital Engagement and Learning, JTS.

Bacon in the Season of Repentance

An unwelcome encounter with a non-kosher chocolate bar made me realize how deeply infused bacon has become in the US culinary landscape. At a friend's house, I casually reached for what appeared to be a run-of-the-mill, fair-trade, organic, 99.9% cacao piece of chocolate. From across the room, before I had a chance to taste the bar, my friend yelled a blood-curdling "*Noooooooo!* It's *bacon* chocolate!" Lo and behold, where other chocolate bars might have pistachios or cherries tucked into their crevices, this bar had flecks of salty, savory bacon.

Indeed, over the past several years, bacon has made its way to some of the most unexpected places: onto donuts, into popcorn, even brewed into beer (which, according to the experts, tastes as unappealing as it sounds). As it becomes clear that living and dealing with "bacon mania" is part of early 21st-century life in the United States, now is a good time to reflect on the Jewish prohibition of eating pork, which appears in this week's parashah.

The specific prohibition of eating pig found in Deuteronomy 14:8 appears in a longer list of permitted and prohibited animals that forms a general guide to elevating the base act of eating with holiness. In *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy*, Dr. Jeffrey Tigay notes that the list of food in Deuteronomy 14 closely mirrors the parallel listing of pure and impure foods found in Leviticus 11, only in a more concise manner, creating a sort of user guide to Jewish dietary practices.

Initially a part of a list of prohibited food in the ancient period, the prohibition against eating pork transformed into one of the taboos that, to this day, is most closely associated with the Jewish People. In the book of Second Maccabees, Eleazer is described as choosing death rather than eating pork. The 1st-century historian Petronius assumed, due to the strength of the taboo, that the Jews worshiped a pig god.

In his book *Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages*, Dr. David Kraemer, Joseph J. and Dora Abbell Librarian and professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at JTS, presents a compelling theory about how the Jewish aversion to pork became so strong. According to Dr. Kraemer, livestock in classic antiquity were

Service of the Heart (תדובע בלה): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, Senior Lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS.

Healing of Body and Soul (Part 1)

In addition to the well-known *mi sheberakh* prayer for healing recited (or sung, in modern versions) during the Shabbat Torah Service, our liturgy engages with the theme of healing in the weekday *'Amidah*, in the blessing that begins, "*Refa'einu Adonai veneraf'ei, hoshi'einu venivashe'a*" (Heal us, Adonai, and we shall be healed, save us and we shall be saved). The blessing continues, asking for complete healing (*refu'ah sh'leymah*) for all among the People of Israel who are unwell.

The blessing's opening words are perhaps the most intriguing and challenging, for they are quoted directly from Jeremiah (changed only by transforming the first person singular into the plural—I becomes we). However, the context of Jeremiah's words suggests that a more complex process is at work. In Jeremiah 17:13–15, we read:

Adonai, the hope of Israel, All who forsake You will be put to shame. Those who turn away on earth will be written down, Because they have forsaken the fountain of living water, even Adonai. Heal me, Adonai, and I will be healed; Save me and I will be saved, For You are my praise. Look, they keep saying to me, "Where is the word of Adonai? Let it come now!"

Now, it is certainly the case that Jeremiah invokes the concept of healing, and that the Hebrew word used is from the root that is now the basis of conventional medical healing: a physician in Hebrew is, of course, rofeh. However, Jeremiah does not seem to be asking to be healed from any medical condition—"healing" is, in this passionate request, set in poetic parallel to "salvation," and Jeremiah is seeking an end to spiritual anguish rather than a cure for the flu.

Perhaps this is the basis of the well-known and widespread phrase that appears in the mi sheberakh formula, "*refu'ah hanefesh urefu'at haguf*" (healing of body and healing of soul). By invoking this text from Jeremiah, we assert and affirm the intrinsic connection between bodily and spiritual healing. We do not, of course, in any way discount the profound and critically important works of skilled physicians in diagnosis and medical care, but we acknowledge that the body does not exist alone and that the soul is intimately linked with it—the soul is always engaged in the process of healing and is sometimes the principal player.

We wonder always what response Jeremiah found to his inner anguish. Certainly it was not penicillin—but it may have been the healing waters of Torah.

Next week we explore further the liturgies of healing and their meaning.

As always, I am interested in hearing comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at sabarth@jtsa.edu

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generally not raised for consumption. Goats and sheep were raised for their milk and wool; oxen were primarily work animals. The Hellenization of Palestine that began in the 2nd century BCE brought with it peoples who raised and ate pigs, previously a rarity in the region. Pigs became the only animal in the region raised solely for human consumption.

As more and more pigs were introduced into the region, Jews were forced to confront the prohibition of eating pork more frequently. Citing a midrash in Sifre Aharei Mot chapter 13 that describes both a Jew's own evil inclination and the mocking of non-Jewish neighbors, Dr. Kraemer writes,

> Why, in the rabbis' world, would both a Jew's non-Jewish neighbors and his or her own transgressive urge mock the prohibition of pork, in particular? Certainly, the prohibition of pork is no more arbitrary or illogical than the prohibition of other animals! The answer must be that pork was the prohibited meat that was actually available to lust after. Otherwise, there would be no reason to imagine that the "evil urge" would be attracted to this meat in particular. (32)

Pork was the only meat available enough for non-Jews to consume and for Jews to desire. Unlike the hoopoe, the owl, the hawk, or other animals listed in Deuteronomy 14, the pig had a role in the day-to-day lives of the average non-Jew and, moreover, was seen and experienced by Jews.

This lived reality of abstaining from pork elevated pig meat from one of many foods prohibited for Jews to the culinary taboo *par excellence* of the Jewish People, symbolic both of a system of holiness—controlling one's base desires—and of separation from a dominant Hellenistic culture. Refraining from pork became a powerful marker of Jewish identity because pork, and the consumption of pork, was ever present, not unlike the US society we inhabit as modern Jews.

Understood this way, the prohibition against eating pork represents the moderation and limitation of human appetite. Humanity has a natural appetite for meat. Rather than deny that appetite, the Torah's laws build a religious structure to limit the desire while infusing it with holiness. We are not asked to run away from our evil inclination and our desires, but rather to acknowledge them and find ways to control them.

The coming week brings Rosh Hodesh Elul, the beginning of the season of repentance that culminates with Yom Kippur. The introspection that occurs during this season often focuses on healing the interpersonal and spiritual wrongs that have been committed over the previous year.

It is during this time that we are asked to focus on our personal metaphoric pork (or bacon chocolate, as it might be): those natural human weaknesses and appetites that surround us and that we all too often fall victim to. In addition to seeking forgiveness, might I suggest a further level of introspection: thinking about the systems and structures that might help control and moderate our appetites, while acknowledging the full spectrum of our desires and inclinations.

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A Taste of Torah

A commentary written by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.

Balancing *Peshat* and Sensitivity

Parashat Re-eh contains a categorical pronouncement against idolatry in the Land of Israel. Once the Israelites enter and dwell in the Promised Land, they are commanded to destroy the devotional sites of other nations: "You must destroy all the sites at which the nations you are to dispossess worshipped their gods, whether on lofty mountains and on hills or under any luxuriant tree. Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire, and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their name from that site" (Deut. 12:2–3). The law is clear cut—zero tolerance for the practices of other peoples in the Land; their ways will corrupt the People and lead them astray from the God of Israel. One need look no further than Israel's journey through the wilderness (especially the episode of Ba'al Peor) or the book of Judges to understand the rationale behind this law. Clearly the Israelites are easily seduced by the idolatrous fetishes of their neighbors. Yet, how may we, as both loyal heirs to the biblical tradition and modern readers, understand this harsh pronouncement of Deuteronomy? Is a more nuanced interpretation possible?

Joseph ben Isaac B'khor Shor softens the blow of Torah's legislation. Echoing the wisdom and discomfort of the rabbinic tradition, he explains that the law of Deuteronomy does not involve the utter and complete destruction of these devotional sites.

> The verse refers to *instruments* used in the service of idolatrous practice. For it is impossible to destroy the *sites*. And it is understood that the land itself is not forbidden. Torah states it is the places where they worship their gods—the mountains do not belong to their gods. For if an idolater bows down to a mountain, the mountain does not become forbidden [to the Israelite]—and so too is the case with hills.

And more than that, he explains that the Land itself does not become tainted through these practices. While the B'khor Shor's approach is a departure from the peshat, or literal sense, of Torah (which literally mandates "obliterating their name from that site"), he is also in the vein of Rabban Gamliel.

Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4 relates the story of Rabban Gamliel, who finds himself bathing in the presence of a statue of Aphrodite. When challenged by Proclus, a Roman, as to why he would be allowed to bathe in the presence of a Greek goddess, Rabban Gamliel responds brilliantly: "I came not within her limits, she came within mine! People do not say, 'Let us build a bath as an adornment to Aphrodite' but 'Let us make a statue of Aphrodite as decoration for the bath' . . . what is treated as a god is prohibited, but what is not treated as a god is permitted." Since Rabban Gamliel was immersed in Hellenistic culture, he wisely recognized the need for accommodation. One could not be a purist as commanded by Deuteronomy 12:2–3. Such action would have cost Rabban Gamliel his life. In his wisdom, Rabban Gamliel softens the text of Deuteronomy, allowing Judaism to stop short of "obliterating their name." Both the B'khor Shor and Rabban Gamliel teach us an important lesson in recognizing the life-affirming shades of grey in Torah. Far from demanding a black-and-white interpretation, we, the loyal readers of Torah, are challenged time and time again to read sensibly and sensitively.

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