



## **Towards a Sustainable Jewish Food Ethic**

In this packet, you'll find text study sheets on a variety of topics related to what and how we eat, prepared by Rabbis Natan Margalit and Toba Spitzer. Together, we'll explore what it would mean to create a Jewish food ethic, to guide our consumption and eating decisions and practices.

### **INSTRUCTIONS:**

Your table will be assigned a topic, so that everyone at the table is studying the same text sheet.

IN HEVRUTAH/PAIRED STUDY, please read aloud each text on your assigned sheet. There are questions to guide your study, but please feel free to ask your own questions! There are no "right" answers; please feel free to challenge the texts and one another.

BACK AT THE TABLE: After about 15 minutes of hevrutah study, come back together as a table and discuss the "table question." Our hope is that you will come up with one or two (or more!) guidelines or practices that you will share with the full group. Are there any "do's" or "don'ts" that your table would like to endorse, that we can add to our evolving Jewish Food Ethic?

Text sheets include:

- Caring for our Health
- Eating & Blessing: Feeding Our Spirits
- Eating & Workers Rights: What's Our Responsibility
- Knowing Where Our Food Comes From
- Prohibition on Cruelty to Animals
- The Gift of Food

**ENJOY!**

## Caring for our Health

### Text #1: Leviticus Rabbah, 34:3

(Note: while this text isn't about food per se, it is a source for the importance given to taking care of our bodies.)

“He who does good to his own person is a man of piety” (Proverbs, 11:17). Such a one was Hillel the Elder. After taking leave of his disciples, he proceeded to walk along with them. His disciples asked him, ‘Master, where are you going?’ He answered, ‘To perform a mitzvah.’ ‘What mitzvah?’ ‘To bathe in the bathhouse.’ ‘But is this a mitzvah?’ ‘It is indeed. Kings’ statues set up in theaters and circuses are scoured and washed down by the official specially appointed to look after them, who receives a salary for the work. More – he is esteemed as one of the notables of the empire. How much more and more am I required to scour and wash myself, who have been created in God’s image and likeness, as is written, ‘In the image of God was humankind made’ (Genesis 9:6).”

#### Hevruta Question:

- How does Hillel interpret the meaning of humanity being created in God’s image? What implications does this have for his approach to caring for our bodies?

**Text #2: Maimonides, *Hanhagat HaBri'ut* 1:3** (quoted in Avraham Greenbaum, *The Wings of the Sun*, p.40)

If a person cared for himself the way he cares for his horses he would avoid many serious illnesses. You won't find anyone who gives his horse too much fodder. He measures out only so much as the horse can tolerate. But he himself eats to excess. He makes sure his animal gets proper exercise to keep it healthy. But when it comes to himself he neglects exercise even though this is a fundamental principle in health maintenance and the prevention of most illnesses.

#### Hevruta Question:

- Maimonides’s comparison to taking care of our domestic animals is powerful. Why is it that we find it so much harder to take care of our own eating and exercise habits than it is to take care of our domestic animals?

**Table Question: In our world today of advertising and obesity epidemics, industrial agriculture and fast food, how might our Jewish practice help us eat in a more healthy manner?**

## Eating & Blessing: Feeding our Spirits

### Text #1: Talmud, Berakhot 35a

Rav Judah said in the name of Samuel: Whoever has enjoyment from this world without saying a blessing, it is as if s/he had [improper] enjoyment from things sacred to heaven. For it is said: “*The earth is God’s and the fullness thereof*” (Psalms 24:1)...Rabbi Hanina bar Pappa said: whoever has enjoyment from this world without saying a blessing, it is as if s/he robbed the Blessed Holy One and the people Israel.

וכתיב, שמים מקדשי נהנה כאילר ברכה בלא הזה העולם מן הנהנה כל: שמואל אמר יהודה רב אמר: כאילו ברכה בלא הזה העולם מן הנהנה כל: פפא בר חנינא רבי אמר...ומלואה הארץ 'לה (ד"כ תהלים) ישראל וכנסת הוא ברוך להקדוש גודל.

### Hevrutah Question:

- According to this Talmud teaching, what is the function of a blessing? How does it make “enjoyment from this world”—that is, eating something that has grown from the earth—a permissible act? In what way is eating without blessing a form of “robbery”?

### Text #2: *Keter Shem Tov*

The Baal Shem Tov (BeShT), the founder of Hasidism, taught: When you take a fruit or any other food in your hand and recite the blessing - *Baruch atah YHVH/Blessed are You etc.* - over it with intention, your mentioning the holy name awakens the spark of divine life by which the fruit was originally created. Everything was created by the power of the holy name. Since an element is awakened when it comes into contact with a similar element, the blessing awakens the element of divine life in the fruit, the element that is the food of the soul.

### Text #3: *Emunat Tzaddikim, quoted in Jewish Spiritual Practices, ed. Yitzhak Buxbaum*

The essential advice on how to deal with food craving is that when you eat you should be aware of what you are doing; then it ceases to be just an animal action. The craving for food is intact if you allow your mind and all your senses to be immersed in eating until you forget what you are doing. Then eating is like an animal’s action. But if you think over what you are doing, and act with consciousness, then you clothe that part of *your* life-energy within this elevated consciousness, and join it with the holy spark within the food (*its* life-energy), and you are removed from the craving.

### Hevrutah Question:

- How do you understand the notion of the “holy spark” within food? When you eat, do you ever have a sense that in addition to the physical sustenance that food provides, your soul, your “life-energy,” is being nourished in some way?

(over)

**Text #4:** Rabbi Meir said: Even if one merely sees a loaf of bread and says, “Blessed be the One who created this bread; how beautiful is this bread!”—that is the same as a blessing over it. But Rabbi Yosi said: A person who changes the formula the sages have fixed for blessings has discharged his or her duty. (Tosefta, *Brakhot* 4:5)

יוסי'ר...ברכתה זו הרי זו פת נאה כמה זו הפת את שברא ברוך ואמר הפת את ראה 'אפי אומר מ"ר יצא לא בברכות חכמים שטבעו ממטבע המשנה כל אומר

**Hevrutah Question:**

- Do you bless your food in any way before you eat?

**QUESTION FOR TABLE DISCUSSION:**

- ❖ **Should a Jewish food ethic include some kind of blessing or mindfulness practice in connection to eating? If so, what?**

## **Eating & Worker Rights: What's Our Responsibility?**

### **Text #1: Excerpts from "Labor Rights in the Jewish Tradition," Michael Perry, The Jewish Labor Committee**

A legacy of support for worker rights stems in part from the broad social justice imperative in the Bible and other Jewish religious sources. In these sources, God is viewed as the ultimate owner of all the earth's resources, and humankind, its temporary owners, is commanded to act ethically in the distribution of those resources...An important set of Biblical commandments requires the prompt payment of wages: "You shall not defraud your neighbor, nor rob him: the wages of one who is hired shall not remain with you all night until the morning" (Leviticus 19:13), and "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or of the strangers who are in your land inside your gates. At the end of the day you shall give him his wages, nor shall the sun go down on it; for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it" (Deuteronomy 24:14-15). Talmudic scholars have interpreted these statements to mean that employers must pay their workers the day that the contracted period of labor ends.

A second set of Talmud laws relates to the right of workers to cease their labor at any time. The principle at stake is that a free worker may not be enslaved, and since the contracting of labor involves the temporary surrender of independence, day laborers may reassert their independence at any time by quitting...A third set of Talmudic laws relate to hours of work. The most important law comes directly from the Bible: the requirement that workers be granted a day of rest, which was quite an innovation for that age...Two other laws relating to hours of work are mentioned in the Talmud. The first requires that workers be paid for hours spent walking to work (although not for hours spent walking home)...A second law prohibits a worker from working at night after working a day shift.

### **Hevrutah Question:**

- What aspects of the food industry might these Biblical and rabbinic standards apply to? What violations of these standards are you aware of?

### **Text #2: Leviticus Rabah 6:2**

There was once a governor who used to put to death receivers of stolen property and release the thieves. Everyone used to find fault with him, saying that he was not acting correctly. What did he do? He issued a proclamation throughout the province, saying: "Let all the people go out to the public field!" What did he do then? He brought some weasels and placed before them portions of food. The weasels took the portions and carried them to their holes. The next day, the governor again issued a proclamation, saying: "Let all the people go to the public field!" Again he brought weasels and placed portions of food before them, but this time he stopped up all the holes. The weasels took the portions and carried them to their holes, but finding these stopped up, they brought the portions of food back to where they'd found them. The governor did this to demonstrate that all the trouble is due to receivers.

(over)

**Hevrutah Question:**

- Do you agree that when it comes to ill-gotten property, the “receivers” of that property bear much of the responsibility? How does the governor’s lesson relate to those of us who benefit from food picked or produced in violation of workers’ wellbeing? Are we the problem?

**QUESTION FOR TABLE DISCUSSION:**

- ❖ **What are the responsibilities of an ethical Jewish food consumer when it comes to worker rights? What might we be prohibited from consuming, and what positive actions might we be instructed to take?**

## Knowing Where Our Food Comes From

### Two Points of View from the Talmud

Text #1: Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brakhot, 58a

Our Rabbis taught: If one sees a crowd of Israelites, he says, Blessed is the One who discerns secrets, for the mind of each is different from that of the other, just as the face of each is different from that of the other. Ben Zoma once saw a crowd on one of the steps of the Temple Mount. He said, Blessed is the One that discerns secrets, and blessed is the One who has created all these to serve me. [For] he used to say: What labors Adam had to carry out before he obtained bread to eat! He ploughed, he sowed, he reaped, he bound [the sheaves], he threshed and winnowed and selected the ears, he ground [them], and sifted [the flour], he kneaded and baked, and then at last he ate; whereas I get up, and find all these things done for me.

נח ברכות בליב תלמוד.  
לשמשני אלו כל שברא וברוך הרזים חכם ברוך אמר הבית בהר מעלה גב על אוכלוסא ראה זומא בן  
זורה ודש ועמר וקצר וזרע חרש לאכול פת שמצא עד הראשון אדם יגע יגיעות כמה אומר היה הוא  
יגע יגיעות וכמה לפני מתוקנין אלו כל ומוצא משכים ואני אכל כ"וואח ואפה ולש והרקיד וטחן וברר  
משכים אניו ללבוש בגד מצא כך ואחר וארג וטוה ונפץ ולבן גזד ללבוש בגד שמצא עד הראשון אדם  
לפני מתוקנים אלו כל ומוצא

### Hevruta Question:

- Why is Ben Zoma blessing God for human differences? Why do you think Ben Zoma so appreciates the blessings of a division of labor? 2000 years ago, what were the issues that he faced in getting food to eat? Were his issues the same as ours?

### Text #2: Avot de Rabbi Nathan 31:1

Rabbi Ahai ben Yoshiya says: One who purchases grain in the market—to what may such a person be likened? To an infant whose mother died and they pass him from door to door among wet nurses and still the baby is not satisfied. One who buys bread in the marketplace—to what may such a person be likened? It is as if his grave is dug and he is buried. But one who eats from her own is like an infant raised at her mother's breasts.

אחאי רבי ה"ד ל פרק א נוסחא נתן דרבי אבות מסכת קטנות מסכתות  
ומחזירין אמו שמתה לתינוק דומה הוא למה השוק מן תבואה הלוקח אומר יאשיה בן אחאי רבי  
וקבור חפור כאלו דומה הוא למה השוק מן פת הלוקח. שבע ואינו אחרות מיניקות פתחי על אותו  
אמו שדי על המתגדל לתינוק דומה משלו האוכל

### Hevruta Question:

- How does this point of view differ from that of Ben Zoma? Is the metaphor of parent to child, in which the earth is our parent and we the children, something that you can relate to? How so?

(over)

## A Modern Point of View

### Text #3: Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, p. 10

Eating puts us in touch with all that we share with the other animals, and all that sets us apart. It defines us. What is perhaps most troubling, and sad, about industrial eating is how thoroughly it obscures all these relationships and connections. To go from the chicken (*Gallus gallus*) to the Chicken McNugget is to leave this world in a journey of forgetting that could hardly be more costly, not only in terms of the animal's pain but in our pleasure, too. But forgetting, or not knowing in the first place, is what the industrial food chain is all about, the principal reason it is so opaque, for if we could see what lies on the far side of the increasingly high walls of our industrial agriculture, we would surely change the way we eat.

### Hevruta Question:

- To which of our Talmudic texts is this more similar? Why is Michael Pollan so concerned with forgetting? Do you think Ben Zoma would have similar concerns if he were living today?



### Table Question:

- **Is there a Jewish obligation to know where our food comes from? How do we put that into practice?**



## Prohibition on Cruelty to Animals

### Exodus 23:5

If you see your enemy's donkey lying under its burden would you refrain from helping him? You shall surely help along with him.

עמו, תעזב עזב--לו מעזב, וחדלת, משאו תחת רבץ, שנאך חמור תראה-כי ה

### Hevruta Question:

- What is the line being drawn by this text between allowing humans to use the labor of an animal and prohibiting cruelty to animals? Does it make a difference that the text specifies “your enemy’s donkey”?

### Text #2 Genesis 1:27-30

And God created humankind in God’s own image, in the image of God created it; male and female did God create them. <sup>28</sup>God blessed them; and God said to them: 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth.' <sup>29</sup>And God said: 'Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed--to you it shall be for food; <sup>30</sup> and to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creeps upon the earth, wherein there is a living soul, [I have given] every green herb for food.' And it was so.

ובכל, הארץ-ובכל ובבהמה, מהשמי ובעוף הים בדגת וירדו; כדמותנו בצלמנו אדם נעשה, אלהים ויאמר <sup>כ</sup>  
<sup>כח</sup> אתם ברא, ונקבה זכר: אתו ברא אלהים בצלם, בצלמו האדם-את אלהים ויברא <sup>כד</sup>. הארץ-על הרמש, הרמש,  
השמים ובעוף, הים בדגת וירדו; וכבשה, הארץ-את-מלאו ורבו פרו אלהים להם ויאמר, אלהים, אתם ויברך,  
הארץ-כל פני-על אשר זרע זרע עשב-כל-את לכם נתתי הנה, אלהים ויאמר <sup>כט</sup>. הארץ-על הרמש, חיה-ובכל,  
לאכלה, יהיה לכם: זרע זרע, עץ-פרי בו-אשר העץ-כל-ואת

### Hevruta Question:

- According to Genesis, Chapter 1, are humans allowed to eat meat?

### Text #3: Genesis 9:1-4

<sup>1</sup>And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth. <sup>2</sup>And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, all that crawls on the soil and all the fish of the sea: into your hand they are given. <sup>3</sup>Every moving thing that lives shall be for food for you; as with the green plants, I now give you all. <sup>4</sup>However: flesh with its life, its blood, you are not to eat.

(over)

על, יהיה, וחתכם ומוראכם<sup>ב</sup>. הארץ-את ומלאו, ורבו פרו להם ויאמר; בניו-ואת נח-את, אלהים ויברך<sup>א</sup> המש-כל<sup>א</sup>. נתנו בידכם, הים דגי-ובכל האדמה תרמש אשר בכל; השמים עוף-כל ועל, הארץ חית-כל תאכלו לא דמו בנפשו, בשר-אך<sup>ט</sup>. כל-את לכם נתתי, עשב כירק: לאכלה יהיה לכם, חי-הואראש

### Hevruta Question:

- According to Genesis, Chapter 9, it now appears that people are allowed to eat meat, although there is a prohibition on eating the blood. In other places in the Torah, the blood is identified with the life, or soul. What do you think is the purpose of the prohibition on eating the blood, mentioned here?

### Text #4: Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed 3:48

Since, therefore, the desire of procuring good food necessitates the slaying of animals, the Law enjoins that the death of the animal should be the easiest. It is not allowed to torment the animal by cutting the throat in a clumsy manner, by pole-axing, or by cutting off a limb while the animal is alive. It is also prohibited to kill an animal with its young on the same day (Lev. xxii. 28), in order that people should be restrained and prevented from killing the two together in such a manner that the young is slain in the sight of the mother; for the pain of the animals under such circumstances is very great. There is no difference in this case between the pain of man and the pain of other living beings, since the love and tenderness of the mother for her young ones is not produced by reasoning, but by imagination, and this faculty exists not only in man but in most living beings.

### Hevruta Question:

- What is the balance that Maimonides is striking between allowing the slaughter of animals for food and the prevention of cruelty to animals?

### Table Question:

**If it appears that Jewish sources allow for the eating of meat, but also the prevention of cruelty to animals, what are the practical implications for a Jewish approach to eating meat today? Should animals raised in conditions of factory farming be considered not kosher? Should we encourage minimizing or eliminating the eating of animals, or not?**

## The Gift of Food

### Text #1

<p><b>Babylonian Talmud, Brakhot 35a - 35b</b></p> <p>Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel, "Anyone who enjoys the benefits of this world without saying a blessing, it is as if he used holy objects for his profane benefit . . . Rav Hanina Bar Papa said, "Anyone who enjoys the benefits of this world without saying a blessing, it is as if he stole from God and from the Jewish people.</p>	<p><b>לה- ברכות לה. -תלמוד בבלי</b></p> <p><b>כל: שמואל אמר יהודה רב אמר</b> <b>- ברכה בלא הזה העולם מן הנהנה</b> <b>שמים מקדשי נהנה כאילו</b></p> <p><b>מן הנהנה כל פפא בר חנינא ר"א ...</b> <b>גודל כאילו ברכה בלא ד"הערה</b> <b>ישראל וכנסת ה"להקב</b></p>
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### Hevruta Question:

- In the opinions of Rav Yehuda and Rav Hanina bar Papa, what does saying a blessing do to transform our relationship to what we eat? If one receives a gift and doesn't say thank you, have I stolen, how is that like stealing?

### Text #2: Midrash Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) Rabbah 7:20

Upon creating the first human beings, God guided them around the Garden of Eden, saying; 'Look at my creations! See how beautiful and perfect they are! I created everything for you. Make sure you don't ruin or destroy My world. If you do, there will be no one after you to fix it.'

כמה מעשי ראה לו ואמר עדן גן אילני כל על והחדירו נטלו הראשון אדם את ה"הקב שברא בשעה שאם, עולמי את ותחריב תקלקל שלא דעתך תן, בראתי בשבילך שבראתי מה וכל הן ומשובחין נאים אחריו שיתקן מי אין קלקלת

### Hevruta Question:

- In this text, how is God trying to convince the first humans to take responsibility for the earth?

(over)

**Text #3: Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, p. 26-27**

*In this text, Lewis Hyde, a modern scholar, describes the Native Americans of the North West coast's gift exchange ceremony for the beginning of the annual salmon runs:*

The first salmon to appear in the rivers was always given an elaborate welcome. . . Finally – and this is what makes it clearly a gift cycle – the bones of the first salmon were returned to the sea. . . .

. . . the first salmon ceremony establishes a gift relationship with nature, a formal give and take that acknowledges our participation in, and dependence upon, natural increase. And where we have established such a relationship we tend to respond to nature as a part of ourselves, not as a stranger or alien available for exploitation. Gift exchange brings with it, therefore, a built-in check upon the destruction of its objects; with it we will not destroy nature's renewable wealth except where we also consciously destroy ourselves. Where we wish to preserve natural increase, therefore, gift exchange is the commerce of choice, for it is a commerce that harmonizes with, or participates in, the process of that increase. \*

note\* In the North Pacific, salmon stocks actually did decline as soon as European settlers began to treat the fish as a commodity to be sold for profit. By the end of the nineteenth century a salmon cannery sat at the mouth of every major river on the Alaskan coast; many overfished the runs and drove themselves out of business. On the East Coast the salmon essentially disappeared, although they were once so plentiful as to have been the dietary staple of the textile workers in the mill towns along the Merrimac River. (In the summer of 1974 a salmon was found in the Connecticut River; it was dead, but it was the first to appear in those waters in a hundred and fifty years.)

**Hevruta Question:**

- According to Hyde, why were the Native Americans more effective in preserving their natural resources than the Europeans? Do you think that saying blessings over our food helps to establish a similar gift relationship? Are there other examples in Judaism of thinking of the bounty of our food as a gift?

**Table Question:**

- **Does experiencing our food as a gift rather than a commodity help us to protect the earth and our food supply? What are ways that Judaism helps foster the idea that food is a gift? What are some practical follow-ups on this concept that you think Judaism might want to adopt?**