

EATING YOUR WAY TO SELF-ESTEEM: A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

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For better or worse, food is an important part of American culture. "Power-lunch", black-tie fundraiser, birthday party, bar/bat mitzvah, wedding and the like, all focus to varying extents around what is served. Food brings pleasure, but it can also cause pain. Beyond legitimate health concerns, many of us live in mortal fear that what we put into our mouth will find its unflattering way onto our figure. Studies report that Americans spend more than \$34 billion a year on dieting and diet-related products - roughly equivalent to what the U.S. Government spends on education in the same period! Inanimate as it is, food can control our life.

The media convince us that if only we would lose weight, we'd be perfect. Women's magazines promote this craze with cover headlines such as, "Why We Crave French Fries..." (Redbook, Feb. '00); "Drop 5 pounds This Month...No Diet!" (Shape, Feb. '00) and "Burn Fat Faster at 25, 35, 45" (Mademoiselle, Jan. '00). In spite of their encouraging, friendly tone, today's "get-thin-quick" headlines imply that we're not good enough as we are.

Food has invaded more than our bodies. It affects our sense of self - while the bathroom scale has become a barometer of self-esteem. With such an unforgiving arbiter of success or failure, it's no wonder some continue to lose weight beyond reason, disciplining themselves onto the path of eating disorders and food addiction. Somehow, we have lost our ability to discern appearance from depth, body from soul. The perception of our inner essence can be distorted by our attachment to physical ideals unattainable by most. We chase beauty trends created by corporate executives who make billions by convincing us that appearance is connected to spiritual well-being.

The truth is that the soul also needs to eat. Self-esteem and a healthy attitude towards food start with acknowledging this reality. While we need to eat in order to survive - and can enjoy doing so - the Torah tells us that man does not live by bread alone. In other words, food should not be an end unto itself, but rather a tool for spiritual growth. G-d instilled in us an ongoing need to eat as a means of motivating us to use the physical world to nourish our innermost self. All Torah commandments related to food are intended to create a pathway from the dinner table to the Divine. This point of view casts new light on the prominent role of food in Jewish tradition. Lox and bagels, chicken soup, matzoh and latkes are not only stereotypes, but also delicious-tasting, authentic opportunities to elevate one's soul!

Judaism's spiritual attitude towards food can be traced to Avraham and Sarah, who were renowned for their gourmet meals and the warmth of their home. When guests thanked them for their hospitality, Avraham and Sarah directed their thanks towards G-d, the Ultimate source of our gratitude. Then as now, the link between a Jew and the Divine can be facilitated by physical means such as the food we eat. This connection to G-d engenders a sense of purposefulness in our lives that is at the heart of true self-esteem. By recognizing that the core of our existence transcends size and shape, we begin to establish a healthy relationship with food and a reverence for the manner in which we eat. In doing so, we acknowledge that our life force comes not from the physical aspect of eating right, but ultimately from the spiritual nourishment it provides.

A healthy attitude towards food can promote a sense of enjoyment in eating and can be instrumental in maintaining the right relationship between body and soul. Of course, this is not easy. Unrealistic commercial ideals of how we should look restrict the expression of each individual's spiritual beauty. In spite of these obstacles, a Jew may achieve a sense of well-being and stability, by eating according to what the Torah teaches and observing the commandments related to food. The practices of kashrut, recitation of blessings before and after eating, ritual hand washing and fasting on Yom Kippur - to name a few - reflect the Torah's sensitivity to the potential spiritual usefulness of food in our lives. Our challenge as Jews is to maintain an awareness of the Divine spark in every aspect of our physical existence, including what we eat. The ensuing self-esteem is calorie-free and leads to the revelation that G-d alone creates and sustains life.

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