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# A Jewish Theology of Food

*Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus*

This article addresses how Jewish food practices are an expression of Jewish theology. It addresses the question: how is Jewish food 'God talk?' and what forms does it take? Jewish dietary practices, the kosher laws, etc., are a kind of Jewish body-language. Attention is paid first to biblical and Rabbinic laws of kashrut (dietary laws), and then how they are 'theological'. The biblical and post-biblical terms for clean and unclean animals are discussed, and the main principles of the kosher preparation of foods, namely the blood prohibition, the non-mixing of milk and meat, and kosher versus non-kosher wine. Also discussed are 'kosher for Passover', the kashrut of animal byproducts like milk and eggs, and of plant-based foods. All these expressions of kashrut suggest that making conscious distinctions (*havdalot*) is an implicit or explicit act of the imitation of God. In addition to the kosher laws, Jewish holiday foods and the typically Jewish ritual practices of eating, reading, and talking about food at the table, as in the Passover Seder, also embody and accentuate Jewish religious values. Particular attention is paid to sensory non-verbal communication through 'Jewish flavour principles' in the tastes and textures of symbolic and characteristic Jewish foods, and the 'evaluative conditioning' that occurs when 'words of Torah' are recited while eating them. Such practices evoke multisensory experiences, which are expressed in synesthetic metaphors of experiences of the Divine. The entry concludes that a Jewish theology of food is an embodied metaphorical theology, doing things with words and food as a kind of 'culinary midrash', a Jewish way of talking about and talking to God.

**Keywords:** Kosher/kashrut, Dietary laws, Culinary midrash, Jewish body language, Holiday foods, Passover, Ethical kashrut, Meat, Animals, Theopoetics, Eating and reading, Jewish flavour principles

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# 1 Culinary Midrash as Jewish theology and theopoetics

Jewish theology can be understood as a mode of practice, an action-oriented ethos, rather than a system of beliefs, as is typical of Christian and Christian-informed theologies. Accordingly, Jewish food rules and rituals, which are central to both Jewish tradition and to actual lived practice, are important expressions of Jewish theology. Insofar as Jewish food rules and rituals have some sort of relationship – direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious – to sacred Jewish texts and traditions, they are a kind of ‘culinary midrash’. Midrash is a Jewish mode of talking about and applying texts creatively and imaginatively to re-‘tell’ (the medium need not be restricted to words) new cultural-historical situations, informed by the interpreter’s new contemporary ethical and cultural sensitivities. It is perhaps the quintessential expression of Jewish theology.

Understanding culinary Midrash as Jewish theology and theopoetics depends on a very specific understanding of midrash as theology – Jewish God talk. Midrash is the traditional Jewish religious term in Hebrew for interpretation, or, more precisely, the interpretation and application of sacred Jewish texts – especially verses from the Torah – to new and changing situations and circumstances. It comes from the verb *darash*, which literally means to seek out or to question. Midrash refers both to this process and to specific books that are collections of such interpretative traditions, especially (though not exclusively) those composed by the rabbis of the Talmudic period from around the second to the eighth centuries CE. Midrashim (the plural), often take the form of stories, even playful rereadings (some might say misreadings) of biblical words and stories. Midrash is arguably the quintessentially Jewish form of theology (Heinemann 1954; Heschel 2005; Neusner 2006).

Culinary Midrash is aptly summarized by the following story, which is itself a kind of Midrash about Midrash.

What is this like? It is like a king of flesh and blood who had two servants. And he loved them both with a perfect love. He gave to the one a measure of wheat and to the other a measure of wheat. And he gave to the one a bundle of flax and to the other a bundle of flax. The clever one of the two, what did he do? He took the flax and wove it into a cloth. And he took the wheat and made it into flour. He cleaned it, ground it, kneaded it, and baked it. And he arranged it on a table. And he spread the cloth over it. And he left it until the king returned. And the foolish one of the two – He did nothing at all. Eventually the king returned to his house and said to them, ‘My sons, bring me what I gave you’. The one brought him the loaf of bread on top of the table with the cloth he made spread over it. The other brought the wheat in a box, and the bundle of flax on top of it. Oy what shame for that

one! Oy what a disgrace for him! Which of these shall I say is the more beloved? The one who brought the table and the loaf of bread on it! (Seder Eliyahu Zuta 2)

This is a parable about interpretation, analogous to the relationship between Jewish meal performances and Jewish meal texts. As a medieval Midrash, it was probably originally intended as a polemic against the Karaites, who denied the authority of the oral Torah, the Rabbinic traditions which the ancient rabbis said were revealed orally to Moses on Mount Sinai along with the written Torah.

Against them, the Midrash asserts the necessary relationship between the Written and Oral Torah, that is, of Midrash itself, interpretation itself. The raw materials, like the Written Torah, come directly from God, since the parable assumes the king to be God, but raw materials are not intended to remain raw: they are to be worked with and made into something pleasing and useful. The question arises of to whom are they pleasing or useful. Clearly, status is the reward for doing something creative, useful, and delightful with the raw ingredients. It is better to be 'more beloved' than to be shamed and disgraced. But in whose eyes? Those of the King. For the rabbis, 'the King' is God. Hence this Midrash is theological – 'God talk', that is, not only talk about God but also a representation of God's talking himself, in the guise of the flesh-and-blood king's response to his two servants. Few contemporary people imagine God as a big bearded man-King in the sky, praising or berating his servants for what they did with the things he left them for safekeeping while he went away. Many do not even believe in the existence of God at all. Such a Midrash could be taken uncharitably as an infantile expression of a need for the approval of God as a father or King.

To focus on this element of the metaphor is to miss the point of the Midrash. It is about arts and craft, creativity, treating what the world gives us as gifts, and the reciprocal exchange of gifts as the expression and maintenance of a relationship we care about. It is also about eating, cooking, sharing food, and making it delightful to another person with whom you are in relationship. The Midrash beautifully represents preparing, sharing, and presenting food as a *theopraxis*, theological body-language. Making bread from wheat, challah covers from flax, and Midrash from the Written Torah are expressions of devotion, love, honour, and gratitude. Whatever and whoever is the object of these creative, poetic acts is 'God'. It is so because we literally make it so. 'God talk', in this sense, is a subset of what is better called 'theopoetics' (Brumberg-Kraus 2023).

Regardless of who the King might be, or whether one even believes in such a King, the texts and traditions about Jewish food – kashrut, the holidays, the stories, poems, liturgies – are but raw ingredients, like the flax and wheat of the parable. To 'cook' them into something more than what they were originally is implicitly to seek out, to '*drash*', something deeper and greater, a taste of being in relationship – an act of culinary

midrash, both metaphorically and literally. What Jews do with these texts and traditions in Sephardic, Ashkenazic, Israeli, multi-ethnic fusion, at holidays, in American delis, with kosher, 'kosher style', or even 'safe *treif* (non-kosher) foods, or in outright transgressive Jewish eating are performances of their Jewish identities. These are their interpretations and applications of an 'oral torah' of the sacred food texts. Sometimes the performances themselves become inscribed or en-scripted as texts, e.g. in the Passover and Tu Bishvat seders, in contemporary Jewish cookbooks or, better, the rituals and rules of Jewish eating.

## 1.1 How is Jewish food 'God talk'?

The assertion that Jewish foodways are, as culinary Midrash, a kind of theology and theopraxis, leads to three questions: (1) what is meant by describing these practices as a kind of language, a 'God talk' (the literal meaning of theology); (2) specifically which Jewish food practices 'count' as God talk: only the Jewish dietary laws (kashrut), or more?; and (3) how can we tell if this Jewish food language is actually talking about (or with) God?

First, in what sense are Jewish food practices in any way a theological language? What Edward Greenstein said about Jewish law in general in his chapter on biblical Law in *Back to the Sources* (1984) is relevant to the biblical and post-biblical dietary laws in particular:

The laws of the Torah are one of its means of teachings; they are the specific behaviors by which God inculcates his ways – what we call values – in his human creatures. If we are to understand these values we must read the laws, in a sense, as a sort of body language that outwardly symbolizes something of much deeper significance. (Greenstein 1984: 84)

Jewish food laws and rituals, a subset of the laws of the Torah (Written and Oral), are thus a kind of 'body language' which teach symbolically 'the specific behaviors by which God inculcates his ways'. In other words, the laws and rituals concerned with food in biblical and Rabbinic tradition and their subsequent interpretations are indeed a kind of God talk, a theological body language. As *mitzvot* (commandments), they imply a commander (*mitzaveh*) and commandees (*metzuvim*). It is the communication between *persons* in a *relationship*.

Secondly, Jewish gastronomic body language should not be restricted to the traditional Jewish dietary laws, kashrut, prescribed in the Torah. Jews at different times and places have expressed their values in many specific eating behaviours that are not limited to keeping kosher, namely, eating specific Jewish holiday foods, like challot; breads in various seasonal shapes; hamantaschen (triangular Purim pastries); and the Hillel sandwich of matzah, bitter herbs, and charoset. There is what Michael Twitty calls Jewish 'identity eating' (2013), as when people choose to eat Jewish deli food; lox and bagels;

Sephardic, Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, and other ethnically Jewish dishes; Israeli/Palestinian foods; and foods from the plethora of Jewish cookbooks (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 3). There are intentional expressions of specific Jewish ideological eating practices that are not, strictly speaking, traditional kashrut, such as mystically Hasidic-informed *avodah be-gashmiyyut* ('worship with the body'), 'ethical kashrut', and Jewish vegetarianism and veganism (Labendz and Yanklowitz 2019). Finally, there is transgressive Jewish eating, or intentionally not observing kosher rules, like going out for *traif* Chinese food on Christmas Eve, or eating pork and seafood restaurants like Traif in New York City (Brumberg-Kraus 2018). These all exemplify different forms of 'gastronomic Judaism as culinary midrash' (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 11–12).

Thirdly, if Jewish food rules and rituals are primarily a body-language, how do we know these refer to 'God'? Midrash, as a traditional practice of Jewish interpretation of scripture, is typically verbal, spoken, or written words about Torah, the word of God. It is arguable that Midrash is the quintessentially Jewish expression of theology (Heschel 2005; Heinemann 1954). It is not only talk about God; as Avivah Zornberg suggests, it can be an imaginative way of speaking with God:

For the midrash to read in the biblical text such intimations of the unconscious life of a people becomes legitimate, in view of one necessary assumption of the rabbinic mind: the implied author of the Torah is God. As Daniel Boyarin succinctly puts it: 'This is not a theological or dogmatic claim but a semiotic one [...]. If God is the implied author of the Bible, then the gaps, repetitions, contradictions, and heterogeneity of the biblical text must be *read ...*'. The midrashic search for multiple levels of meaning, the attempt to retrieve unconscious layers of truth, is warranted by the assumption that, as God's work, the Torah encompasses all. 'Turn it, and turn it, for all is in it,' says Ben Bag Bag, using the image of the plow turning the earth, breaking, transforming, reversing, subverting. Two thousand years later, such an image of excavation becomes the informing image in Freud's project: to unearth the repressed life that is encrypted within the human experience. The psychoanalytic project, like the midrashic one, represents a dissatisfaction with surface meanings, and a confidence that rich if disturbing lodes seam the earth's depths. The activity of the plowman is not only legitimate but imperative: in this way, the interpreter responds to the claim of God's text. (Zornberg 2001: 6, original emphasis)

Many Jewish food rituals involve words to accompany the physical materials and gestures of eating, such as blessings, which specifically address 'YHWH our God' by name in the second person, and then shift to third person verbs, e.g.: 'Blessed are You YHWH our God, who sanctified us by Your commandments, and commanded us to eat matzah'. Thus, the fourteenth-century Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, in his eating manual *Shulchan Shel*

*Arba* (Table of Four, 2010), argues that the grammar of the typical formulation of Rabbinic blessings makes an important theological assertion, namely:

What goes for this blessing, *al netilat yada'im* [for washing hands], that it is worded with both the explicit second person singular pronoun 'You' and the 'hidden' pronoun implicit in the third person singular past tense verb form, is the rule for the rest of the blessings that are fixed according to this formula [...] in order to fix in the heart that the Holy One Blessed be He is both revealed and hidden: revealed in regard to His ways and actions; hidden in regard to His essence and His very Selfhood [...]. So in order to hint at Him being revealed and hidden, Scripture has said, 'And your faithful ones shall bless You [Ps 145:10],' that is to say, 'in this way they shall bless You' revealed and hidden, and this what is meant by 'They shall talk of the majesty of Your kingship [*kevod malkhutkha*, Ps 145:11],' using the present tense, to teach about Him being revealed. And it said, 'to make His mighty acts known among men [ibid., 145:12]' to teach about Him being hidden. (ben Asher 2010)

R. Bachya's Midrash of Ps 145:10–12, as applied to blessings, makes the semantic claim into a theological and dogmatic claim (cf. Boyarin, cited in Zornberg 2001: 6). Such eating with talking makes these rituals doubly 'mitzvot with the mouth' (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 144–145).

## **1.2 What are the forms of Jewish food talk?**

There are three main types of Jewish food talk: (1) the 'body language' of Jewish food rules and rituals discussed above: the kosher laws and other Jewish food practices; (2) literal food talk in Jewish texts about food and in the written and oral scripts recited when performing Jewish food rituals of eating and talking, and eating and reading; and (3) sensory non-verbal communication by tasting, smelling, touching, seeing, and hearing what food is 'telling us'.

## **2 Jewish food body language: the kosher laws and beyond**

Jewish food body language, *avodah be-gashmiyyut* (worship with the body) in Hasidic terms, consists of the Jewish dietary laws (kashrut), Jewish holiday food rules, and other Jewish food rituals.

### **2.1 Kashrut: the Jewish dietary laws and Jewish theology**

The Jewish dietary laws, as promulgated first in the Hebrew Bible and then expanded upon in post-biblical Rabbinic literature, define what foods – and what methods for preparing and serving them – are appropriate for Jews to eat, according to the authorities

who composed the texts in which they appear. Historically, those were primarily the Priestly (P) authors of the food rules in Leviticus and other P materials, as well as the scribal authors of the food rules in Deuteronomy, and the Talmudic and post-Talmudic rabbis. In other words, these authorities developed a culinary body language, a Torah of food, to teach and act on the values of their worldviews and ethos, or, as they would understand it, ‘the specific behaviors by which God inculcates his ways – what we call values – in his human creatures’ (Greenstein 1984: 84). In particular, the biblical and Rabbinical dietary rules map out a hierarchical world of Creator and creatures, who, despite their differences, are fundamentally related. These rules use their hierarchies to justify what, how, and with whom to eat, sleep with, avoid as predators, or otherwise relate to (or not) in accordance with God’s preferences, as their promulgators understood them. As Leviticus puts it:

For I am YHWH your God; sanctify yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves [...]. For I am YHWH who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy. This is the law pertaining to land animal and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms upon the earth, to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten. (Lev 11:44–47)

Though these verses do not refer to sexual relations, dangerous strangers, or other sources of dangerous ‘uncleanness’ per se, much of the rest of Leviticus does.

### **2.1.1 Clean and unclean animals: biblical and post-biblical terminology**

By specifying the distinction between land, sea, and sky animals that are clean for Israelites to eat, this summary of the dietary laws of Leviticus 11 implies that they are either not appropriate to sleep with or to avoid as predators (note that predatory land animals and birds are mostly prohibited to eat). However, unclean animals are fit for non-Israelites (potentially dangerous strangers) to eat, and clean animals fair game for them to sleep with. Some Rabbinic texts explicitly disparage Gentiles as being likely to have sex with a Jew’s domestic animal if left alone with it (e.g. *m. Avodah Zarah* 2:1).

### **2.1.2 Biblical and post-biblical terminology for kashrut**

More importantly, the laws in Leviticus remind us that biblical and post-biblical texts have different terminology for kashrut. Indeed, the terms kosher/*kasher* and kashrut are themselves post-biblical, though they refer to the system of dietary rules spelled out in the Hebrew Bible. Biblical dietary rules are primarily concerned with the flesh of animals, with some important exceptions. The Bible distinguishes between animals that are clean

or unclean (Hebrew *tahor* and *tamei*), while Rabbinic and post-Rabbinic literature uses *kasher* and *treif* for the same distinction. *Treif* has a biblical Hebrew origin: clean animals killed by other animals are *trefah* (literally ‘torn up’) and cannot be eaten.

## **2.2 Main principles of the kosher preparation of foods**

### **2.2.1 The blood prohibition**

A clean animal must be slaughtered correctly for it to be fit to eat, particularly, in a way in which as much as possible of the animal’s blood has been removed by severing the jugular, and, in later rabbinic tradition, through soaking and salting. The prohibition against eating blood is an important provision of kashrut. When God concedes to humans the eating of meat after the flood, it comes with this caveat:

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you, and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. *Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.* Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed, for in his own image God made humans. (Gen 9:3–6, emphasis added)

The blood prohibition when eating food from animal flesh (which the Torah requires of all humans, not just Israelites) reinforces the value of avoiding, or, better, limiting the violent taking of other creatures’ lives, while maintaining the hierarchy of humans over animals, and God over both. It is acceptable for humans to kill animals for food, but not to kill other humans – so they must not spill the blood of either. Although it is acceptable for God to kill humans and other animals, as he just did in the flood, it is not without limits. God, through Noah, spared two of every unclean animal, and seven pairs of clean animals on the ark. In that sense, humans are to act in God’s image when they limit what they consume of the animals that they do kill for food.

### **2.2.2 Non-mixing of milk and meat**

A second fundamental prohibition of Jewish dietary rules is the non-mixing of milk and meat. Though the original biblical rule prohibits only the boiling of a baby goat in its mother’s milk, Rabbinic and post-Rabbinic tradition expanded this to prohibit the mixing of any meat and dairy products; cooking or serving them together at the same table, regardless the type of animal flesh and its familial relationship (for example, no chicken parmesan); requiring separate dishes for preparing and serving meat and dairy, and even time limits when eating dairy after meat (though not vice versa; Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 33–34). This led to the distinction between *milchig* (dairy), *fleishig* (meat), and *parve* (neutral) dishes, in Ashkenazic Jewish Yiddish terms, as well as cooking utensils, kitchens, and

meals, though the categories are the same for all kashrut observers. Kosher fish (with fins and scales, excluding shellfish) are considered *parve* – neither dairy nor meat – (even though like other kosher animals they have blood), which exempts them from kosher slaughter, and permits them to be eaten with dairy foods, though not with meat (according to the kosher observance of many).

### **2.2.3 Kosher and non-kosher wine**

A third important category in kashrut is the distinction between kosher and non-kosher wine. The terminology and exposition of these rules are primarily Rabbinic and have to do with the production and use of the wine. Non-kosher wine is produced and used by Gentiles, either *yayin neseikh* ('wine poured out to idols') or *stam yeynam* ('their wine'; Soloveitchik 2008). Rabbinic authorities forbid the former because it is intended and used for idolatrous worship, and the latter because of the suspicion it might be used that way. Even a kosher wine if touched by a Gentile becomes un-kosher, unless it has been boiled (*mevushal*). The intent behind prohibiting Gentile wine seems to be to prevent fraternization between Jews and Gentiles, which may lead to idolatry and intermarriage (*b. Avodah Zarah* 36b; Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 65–67). The Bible distinguishes between *yayin* (wine) and *sheikhar* (sometimes translated as beer but can refer to other alcoholic beverages). Alcoholic beverages like beer, whiskey, gin, and vodka are 'kosher' regardless of whether they are made by Gentiles or not, as long as they do not have grape products in them. Port wine, cognac, and other grape-based brandies must be distilled from kosher wine to be drunk.

## **2.3 Kosher for Passover**

An important subcategory of kashrut is the temporary prohibition of eating *chametz*, bread, and bread-like products made from wheat and barley that have been allowed to leaven when mixed with liquids (usually water) during the seven- or eight-day festival of Passover. Moreover, the leavening agent *se'or*, often translated as yeast, but more accurately as starter dough, is prohibited to bake with and eat, and must be removed from one's home during Passover. The Bible gives remembrance of the hasty Exodus from Egypt as the reason for these rules, when they took their dough with them before it had a chance to rise (Exod 12:19–20, 34). Moreover, this prohibition was issued as a criterion of Israelite identity; those who do not observe it are to be cut off from the community of Israel (Exod 12:19). Much later, medieval Ashkenazic (Northern and Eastern European) Rabbinical authorities extended the Passover prohibition against eating leavened bread and bread products to include *kitniyot*, legumes including beans and flours made from them, as well as rice.

This led to a significant distinction between Ashkenazic and Sefardic and Mizrahi Jewish observance of Passover dietary rules, since the latter continued to permit *kitniyot*, albeit

with some minor regional variations. However, more recently, some liberal Rabbinic authorities have loosened the restrictions on *kitniyot* during Passover to accommodate mixed Ashkenazi, Sephardi, or Mizrahi households, especially in Israel, and the growing number of Jewish vegans and vegetarians for whom avoiding *kitniyot* during Passover was an unnecessary hardship limiting their enjoyment of the Passover festival (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 51–53). In any case, the body-language of eating or abstaining from *kitniyot* during Passover articulates intra-Jewish social boundaries, and expresses which internal Jewish social group one belongs to. It thus implies a certain kind of Jewish theological pluralism, at least in principle. Although God wants some Jews to eat *kitniyot* during Passover, and others not to, he still wants them to live together as one Jewish community. Applying (as some Rabbinic authorities do) the rules of *kitniyot* accommodates Jews who differing in their observance of *kitniyot* to intermarry, eat together, and shop at the same kosher stores, and even ‘convert’ from *kitniyot* avoidance to *kitniyot* consumption, especially in the State of Israel.

## **2.4 Ethical kashrut**

Some modern interpreters go beyond the biblical and Rabbinic requirements of kashrut to accentuate even more intentionally the meaning of what they want to say with their Jewish body-language of food rules: eco-kashrut, ethical kashrut, and Jewish vegetarianism and veganism. One group is Hazon, an organization dedicated to ‘raising awareness about sustainability, climate change, and environmental issues within the Jewish community’, which Nigel Savage founded in 2000, and recently renamed Adamah because of its merger with the Pearlstone Retreat Center (Adamah 2023). Hazon has been bringing together and supporting many of the people and institutions involved in these efforts with programs and other educational materials. Companies such as Grow and Behold and KOL Foods produce and sell meat that is not only halakhically kosher-certified but also raised sustainably from humanely-treated animals: grass-fed cows and sheep, and free-range chicken. Their producers and consumers are committed to eco-kashrut. Ethical kashrut considers not only environmental sustainability and non-mistreatment of the animals raised for food but also how justly the human workers who produce and serve the kosher food are treated and compensated. Magen Tzedek (Conservative) and Uri L’Tzedek (Orthodox) are two Jewish organizations advocating for workers’ rights. Uri L’Tzedek issues a *Tuv Ha-Yosher* (‘Ethical Seal’) which ‘aims to secure workers’ rights to fair pay, fair time, and safe working conditions in kosher restaurants (Yanklowitz 2022–2023). Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz, a co-founder of Uri L’Tzedek, makes it clear that ethical kashrut is not a halakhic redefinition of kashrut, and that indeed some Orthodox rabbinic authorities like Rabbi Avi Shafran, a spokesperson for Agudath Israel, assert that ethical concerns have no actual bearing on the kashrut of food. Yanklowitz nevertheless insists that environmental ethics and workers’ rights should govern Jewish food choices in addition to kashrut (Yanklowitz 2022–2023). Indeed, that led Yanklowitz to personally

adopt and advocate veganism as a Jewish eating practice (Labendz and Yanklowitz 2019). In any case, these efforts are a reminder of how important it is to underline that the kosher laws not only map out a meaningful system of what to eat and what to avoid but also imply the acceptance of the authority of God and his representatives: the biblical authors, ancient and modern rabbis, and even oneself.

## 2.5 Making distinctions in kashrut as the imitation of God

This raises the theological dimension of kashrut as gastronomic Jewish body-language: what does God want us to eat and why? The theological purpose of kosher laws can be summed up as to make distinctions *havdalot*, just as God does (Lev 11:46–48; 20:24–25). Taking a cue from the traditional Jewish Havdalah blessing recited to end the Sabbath:

Blessed are you YHWH our God, who distinguishes between sacred and profane (*kodesh le-khol*), between light and darkness (*or le-hoshekh*), between Israel and the [other] nations (*Yisrael le-amim*), between the seventh day and the six days of 'doing' (*yom ha-shvi'i le-sheshet yamei ha-ma'aseh*). Blessed are you YHWH, who distinguishes between sacred and profane [...].

Leviticus offers (explicitly or implicitly) these same divine differentiations as rationales for its food rules. When Leviticus requires Israelites to separate holy food for priests, and not lay people (Lev 21:10–15), it is to distinguish 'between sacred and profane' (*kodesh le-khol*) as God does. When Leviticus requires Israelites to distinguish between the different kinds of created species to eat and not eat, it is a kind of replication of God's acts of separation to create the 'natural' divisions in the world (Lev 20:25; Gen 1), like the division between light and darkness (*or le-hoshekh*) that God made in the beginning. It is important to make distinctions even between the foods one is permitted to eat, whether in the prohibitions to keep kosher dairy and meat foods (and their utensils) separate from one another; or between edible plant seeds, at least conceptually, like grains vs. legumes (*kitniyot*) and inedible seeds that produce edible fruits and vegetables, according to Maimonides (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 52–53). The distinctions Israelites make between clean and unclean animals distinguish them from the other nations (Lev 20:24, 27), i.e. like God does 'between Israel and the nations' (*Yisrael le-amim*) in the Havdalah blessing above. Finally, one must distinguish between between holy and profane days in the calendar, not just between the Sabbath and the other six days of the week (*yom ha-shvi'i le-sheshet yamei ha-ma'aseh* in the Havdalah blessing above), but also the different festivals (Lev 23), not to mention the sabbatical and jubilee years (Lev 25:1–22). Typically, those days are distinguished in practice by what foods one can or cannot eat on them: e.g. unleavened bread but no chametz during Passover; no foods cooked on the day of the Sabbath, though foods kept warm, like cholent, are permitted; different foods sacrificed

for the different festivals; no food consumed on the Day of Atonement; and no plant foods to be sown or pruned in the land of Israel during the sabbatical year, though the fruits of perennial plants like berries are permitted, as are foods sown and harvested the sixth year and preserved (Lev 25:3–7, 11, 19–22; Brumberg-Kraus 2015). As Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus states,

There is a certain order to creation, differentiations between and hierarchies of species, which are to be maintained in the diets of ‘all the animals on land, all the birds in the sky, and all that creeps on the earth, in which there is the breath of life’. (Gen 1:30) But this continuation of creation is especially incumbent upon human beings, who having eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, know something of the mind of God – ‘have become like one of us, knowing good from bad,’ as God puts it (Gen 3:22).

Though perhaps the most elaborated dietary rules and taboos in Jewish tradition focus on meat, [...] even everyday foods like bread that come from plants provide their consumers with opportunities to differentiate, distinguish, and elevate themselves and their places in God’s creation. (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 53)

In other words, the Jewish dietary laws require one to make distinctions in the created world just as God made distinctions when he created the world. This is to be both elevated and apart, the literal meaning of *kadosh*, ‘holy’, as in the justification Leviticus gives for its list of dietary rules in chapter 11: ‘To be holy, because I YHWH your God am holy’.

### 3 Jewish holiday foods

Though some of the laws of kashrut and other dietary laws already prescribe specific foods for specific holidays, especially for Passover, this principle of differentiating foods carries over into non-Halakhic culinary practices. There are Halakhic requirements to eat *matzah*, *maror* (the bitter herb), and the *pesach* lamb offering in the time of the Temple, and to avoid chametz during Passover, and to eat cooked foods prepared before the Sabbath and kept warm during it, e.g. Ashkenazic *cholent* and other Sefardic and Mizrahi regional variations of *hamin* (literally ‘hot foods’) such as *dafina*, *s’ficha*, etc. There are also Jewish traditions to prepare other holiday-specific foods (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 81–88, 92–102). For example, while it is customary to eat challah for every Jewish holiday – except Passover when one eats only unleavened bread – there are different characteristic shapes for each holiday. Typically, one serves two braided oblong loaves of egg-enriched challah for Sabbath meals, but round loaves, often sweetened with honey and raisins, for the New Year season and Sukkot, to symbolize the yearly cycle. For the holiday of Shavuot there is a special Seven Heavens (*siete cielos*) challah in the shape of Mount Sinai, decorated with a ladder to the top and symbols of the feast in the world

to come: the Leviathan fish and Bar Yuchnai, a big bird (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 45–47). It is also traditional to eat dairy foods on Shavuot, such as blintzes and cheesecake. On Hannukah, one eats fried foods, like potato latkes and *sufganiyot* (filled doughnuts). On Purim, one makes and gives as gifts stuffed triangle pastries, *hamantaschen*, or *oznei haman* ('Haman's ears') representing parts of the body or apparel of the Purim story's villain (or in the case of poppy seed *hamantaschen*, maybe a feminine fertility symbol, a 'womantasch' [Schnur 1998]). For Tu Bishvat, one eats tree fruits according to the ritual of the Tu Bishvat Seder. Typically, Jewish Sabbath and holiday meals require wine and feature meat (except Shavuot) and multiple dishes, or stuffed dishes for the harvest holiday of Sukkot, often with sweet ingredients, to symbolize and enact abundance and joy. An ordinary Ashkenazic side dish of roasted carrots, *tzimmes*, is enhanced for holidays, Sukkot especially, with sweet dried fruits, perhaps a *knaidel* (a matzah meal dumpling), and the addition of meat. This accumulation of ingredients as well as the sweetening the dish implicitly ranks the importance of 'the Holiday', a traditional nickname for it, higher than dishes and meals on ordinary days, as do the doubling of loaves of bread on the Sabbath and the quadrupling of the cups of wine for the Passover seder. It is an implicit way of distinguishing these days as holier than ordinary days, in what has been called the '*tzimmes* principle', inspired by Mary Douglas' interpretation of Napoleon's Chicken Marengo as a full dinner meal in a single dish (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 98–102; Douglas 1972: 68).

Sweetening complex Jewish dishes may have an additional function, as in the 'Hillel Sandwich', composed of bitter herb (*maror*), *charoset* (already itself a mixture of sweet dry fruits, wine, chopped nuts, and aromatic spices like cinnamon), and a morsel of the Passover lamb offering in the time of the Temple, between two pieces of matzah. The ingredients connote and remind its consumers of the history of the Israelites' suffering as slaves in Egypt: the bitter herb 'because the Egyptians embittered our lives'; the *charoset* (perhaps from the Hebrew word *cheres*, clay), a reminder of the bricks they were forced to make; the matzah, to recall the haste in which they had to leave Egypt; and the Passover lamb by whose slaughter they escaped the tenth plague of the killing of the firstborn Egyptians and were redeemed from Egypt itself. From the time the rabbis of the Talmud instituted it, the lamb was missing from the sandwich, since the temple had been destroyed and the sacrifices ended, and yet one still recites Hillel's custom of combining the *maror* and Passover lamb in a matzah 'roll-up' (*korekh* – matzah was soft in his day, and Hillel did not mention *charoset*) at the Seder. In other words, it is both literally and metaphorically a bittersweet sandwich, symbolizing both the sweetness of the redemption (in the taste of the *charoset*) and the bitterness of the exile and suffering that is the nature of the Jewish historical and the human experience in general. The taste we enjoy belies the words we say and the history we allude to (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 78–79), and yet the overall sensory experience is of sweetness and joy.

## 4 Literal Jewish food talk

While the body language of kashrut and Jewish holiday meal practices certainly communicate implicit ideas about God and his values, its messages are not always unambiguous or clear to its performers and audiences. Moreover, Jewish tradition considers intention a very important part of fulfilling the commandments, mitzvot, and other divinely desired activities, such as the theurgic *tikkunim* (literally ‘repairs’, which in kabbalah refer to practices intended to repair the cosmos), for their efficacy (*m. Ber* 4:4; Bachya ben Asher, *Shulchan Shel Arba*, Gate 2; Brumberg-Kraus 2006: 127).

Tikkunim is also the technical term for the genre of Jewish literature providing liturgies for these practices (Gries 1989: 80-93). For examples of literal Jewish food talk, in rituals of eating and reading, eating and talking, there are food blessings (over bread, wine, bitter herbs, tree fruits, and ground fruits); the grace after meals like *birkat ha-mazon*, etc; food ceremony scripts (‘haggadot’ or seders) like for the Passover Seder, the Tu Bishvat Seder, the ‘seder’ of blessings for Shabbat and festival meals; and scripted improvisation or talking points (‘words of Torah over/about the table’ [*m. Avot* 3:3]) such as in Rabbenu Bachya ben Asher’s fourteenth-century mystical eating manual *Shulchan Shel Arba* [Table of Four]. Brumberg-Kraus refers to these as ‘mitzvot with the mouth’, borrowing the term nineteenth-century Hasidic interpreters used to describe specifically the requirements to eat certain foods and say certain words about them in the Passover seder (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 143-156). Modern examples of Jewish food texts are Jewish cookbooks, Gil Marks’ *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* (2010), and online Jewish food blogs which are scripts for preparing Jewish meals.

## 5 Sensory non-verbal communication: Jewish flavour principles

In addition to explicit, literal forms of Jewish food talk like reciting blessings and reading liturgical scripts at the table, and the body-language of kashrut, special holiday foods, and the other Jewish dietary practices discussed above, there is also sensory non-verbal communication from the food and what is done with it. This is found in, for example, the visual art of illuminated Passover haggadot, the visual and tactile cues of challah plates and covers and other food-related Jewish ritual objects, and the smells and tastes of foods required or preferred at Jewish meals and celebrations. These taste preferences are what Brumberg-Kraus has categorized as ‘Jewish flavour principles’, following Elizabeth Rozin and John Prescott’s understandings of flavour principles (Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 157–177; Rozin 2005: 42–45; Prescott 2012). They are more than taste per se, rather they are the combination of certain patterns of preferred tastes, aromas, ingredients, textures, cooking methods, etc. which are characteristic of different regionally-based ethnic groups (Prescott 2012: 150).

## 5.1 ‘Evaluative conditioning’ in Jewish flavour principles

Jewish flavour principles can be traced back to sacred texts like the Bible and Rabbinic literature that articulate them in religio-cultural prescriptions. ‘Mitzvoth with the mouth’ in the ritual scripts like the Passover and Tu Bishvat haggadot, in eating manuals like R. Bachya’s *Shulchan Shel Arba*, and in the table blessings, typically allude to these sacred texts of Torah about the table, or quote snippets from them verbatim. They do so with a purpose; they are verbal cues to specific sensory experiences. In other words, reading, talking, and eating together results in a value-added aesthetic experience. Their effect makes some flavours pleasurable and others disgusting. For example, classical Jewish texts and practices profess preferences for roasted, aromatic, salty, umami meat flavours; ‘sweetening the bitter’ (as in charoset and the ‘Hillel Sandwich’ [Brumberg-Kraus 2018: 78–79]); greens in certain circumstances; refined wheat bread (versus rice or maize) as a staple; and abhorrence for certain flavours and flavour combinations: pork, seafood, meat with dairy, or mayonnaise on white bread. There are also seasonally-prescribed preferences – certain foods on certain holidays, like unleavened bread during Passover in the spring, sweets at Purim in the spring, and fried foods in the dead of winter during Hannukah.

This is a phenomenon that John Prescott, a psychologist of taste and other sense perceptions, calls ‘evaluative conditioning’. Prescott says,

it is possible that we automatically form associations between the context or environment in which the exposure occurs and the exposed item [...T]he context in which a food is consumed is obviously a crucial part of the eating experience and thus the degree to which a food or meal is pleasurable. It has been shown that a familiar food or meal will be enjoyed more if it is eaten in an environment that is highly regarded. (Prescott 2012: 69)

Jewish scriptural and ritual traditions ‘evaluatively condition’ certain flavours or combinations of flavours into ‘Jewish flavour principles’ (Brumberg-Kraus 2018). Conveyed in these Jewish flavour principles, active in the multisensory performance of Jewish food rituals – ‘mitzvoth with the mouth’ – is an implicit theology about who or what one is relating to when experiencing them – i.e. ‘God’.

## 5.2 Synesthetic metaphors of experiences of the Divine

The Hebrew Bible and post-biblical Jewish midrash represent experiences of ‘the Divine’ in synesthetic metaphors (Brumberg-Kraus 2010). Take for example the mixed sensory metaphors in these verses:

(1) ‘Truly the ear tests words as the palate tastes food’ (Job 12:11).

- (2) Song Of Songs.
- (3) 'The song of songs, by Solomon. Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth, for your love is sweeter [lit. 'better', *tovim*] than wine. Your ointments yield a sweet fragrance, your name is like finest oil' (1:1).
- (4) 'Let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet [Heb. *arev*], and your face is comely' (2:14).
- (5) 'I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride, I have smelled my myrrh and spice, Eaten my honey and honeycomb, Drunk my wine and my milk. Eat lovers and drink: Drink deep of love!' (5:1).
- (6) 'Taste and see that the Lord is sweet [lit. in the Hebrew, 'good', *tov*]' (Ps 33:9).
- (7) 'They made life bitter [*va-yi-mareru*] for them with harsh labour at mortar and bricks' (Exod 1:14).
- (8) The Israelite elders at Mount Sinai 'had a vision of God and ate and drank' (Exod 24:11).

There are five different ways in which these synesthetic metaphors use taste, combined with other senses, to communicate experiences of the Divine: (1) as a multisensory experience of sensory 'overload' and the coincidence of opposites (e.g. taste vs. sound of maror [bitter herb]); (2) bringing near what is sensed from afar, e.g. tasting and seeing or tasting and hearing; (3) tasting and seeing or hearing as knowing ('real eating'), like the medieval Christian association of *sapere* ('to savour') with *sapientia* ('wisdom'); (4) tasting what is good to see (aesthetically), to do (morally), and to know (conceptually coherent); (5) tasting what is sweet *and* bitter (Job 12:11).

'God' is all these things, revealed so palpably in the performance of Jewish eating and talking rituals that the participant can taste who God is. Thus R. Bachya ben Asher understood the meaning of the Israelite elders' experience at Mount Sinai in Exod 24:11: 'They had a vision of God, and they ate and drank', simultaneously, not sequentially (Brumberg-Kraus 2006; 2010: 46).

### **5.3 *Ta'amei Ha-mitzvot*: tasty reasons for the commandments**

R. Bachya's interpretation of divine revelation as knowledge that you can taste accords with his medieval kabbalist contemporaries' interpretation of the Jewish rabbinic and philosophical tradition of finding *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, 'reasons for the commandments'. The Torah itself occasionally gives some reasons for the commandments, as seen with the explanation of 'to remember the Exodus' for the Passover food rules, or 'be holy because I am the Lord your God' for the dietary and other rules in Leviticus. However, it is a Rabbinic and especially medieval Jewish philosophical innovation to seek actively to find reasons for the commandments, and to call them *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* (Heinemann 2008 [first published 1954]). However, R. Bachya's Jewish mystical contemporaries took advantage of the dual definition of the Hebrew word *ta'am* as both 'reason' and 'taste'.

They turned it into a metaphor for their experience of linking mind and body, when they self-consciously performed the traditional rituals according to the new mystical reasons they found for them (*ta'amei ha-mitzvot*). As one mystic put it, '[w]e will be able to prepare tasty reasons [*mat'amim*] for [God's] ritual laws, such as He loves" (Matt 1986: 398, citing the *Zohar* 3:271b [*Raya Mehemna*] and other thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Spanish Kabbalistic sources). In other words, these mystics made the explicit theological assertion that God wants us to know him and his will both cognitively and experientially, that is, through taste and the other senses (Brumberg-Kraus 2010). Moreover, *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* in this sense need not refer specifically to tasting God's *mitzvot*, but even practices connected to the Jewish holiday and yearly Torah reading cycle. That is the premise of a modern Hebrew cookbook entitled *Mat'ame ha-Mikra: Matkonim be-nihoah Parashat ha-Shavu'a* (*Delicacies of Scripture: Recipes with the Fragrance of the Torah Portion of the Week*; Forer-Kremer 2008). This is a pun on the Hebrew term for the cantillation notes for chanting the Torah, *ta'amei ha-mikra*, with an allusion to the biblical term for the fragrance, *nihoah*, which God enjoys from the sacrifices. This book offers recipes from various religious and non-religious Jewish public personalities suggested by the themes of the weekly Torah portion or adjacent holidays, especially dishes drawn from their family traditions. Like the Jewish mystics' word play on *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*, it stresses how one can taste the words of God sensually and synesthetically, through food and eating, real and metaphorical.

## **6 Conclusion: is this a Jewish theology?**

This understanding of 'God talk' is expansive. It is not only words, but also body-language, what our senses communicate to us. Words accompanying this non-verbal communication may help specify who it is we are talking about, to whom it is we are talking, and who is talking to us. But words themselves are not enough for a Jewish theology, and especially not a Jewish theology of food; they are and must be embodied.

For the present author, talk about 'God' means talking about human and 'other-than-human persons', as Graham Harvey discusses in *Food, Sex and Strangers: Understanding Religion as Everyday Life* (2013). We are talking to and listening to them. It is akin to the 'pluralistic pantheism' Mary-Beth Rubenstein articulates in *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters* (2018). We are driven by impulses to connect with, avoid, and respect others (i.e. manifestations of 'God' or 'the sacred') in our basic life choices: who or what is food, partner, or predator? Having meaningful interaction with human and other-than-human persons, by 'elevating' their difference and sameness, is what is meant by the terms 'God' or 'being in God's image' in the word-games of theology.

### **6.1 'Jews do, Christians believe'?**

Readers may recognize this understanding of Jewish food theology as a mode of practice, an action-oriented ethos, rather than a system of beliefs typical of Christian and Christian-informed theologies. This is akin to a tradition of scholarship that asserts ‘Jews do, Christians believe’, i.e. Martin Buber (1951), Leo Baeck (1995), and Susan Handelman (1982). More recently, Daniel Boyarin (1992), Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (1992), and many others have emphasized the ‘carnality’ and ‘embodiedness’ of Jewish religiosity. One does not have to be a Jewish theologian, nor even Jewish or a theologian to draw this distinction. It is increasingly recognized in the critical comparative study of religions that most religions, other than Christianity, centre practice (i.e. doing) and relationships between human and other-than-human persons. Graham Harvey has forcefully asserted that Christianity may be the only religion that centres belief and systems of belief. Because of its political and cultural dominance, these Christian norms have influenced other religions and the academic study of religion itself to define themselves consciously or unconsciously according to Christian criteria. ‘Theology’ itself is at first sight one of these Christian criteria.

## **6.2 Doing things with words, and doing things with food as Jewish embodied metaphorical theology**

However, if ‘theology’ is a type of Midrash, a Jewish mode of doing something with words – a Jewish language game – then one can translate Jewish body language about and with ‘God’ into something intelligible to those who speak and understand Christian (and non-Christian) theology. This approach is influenced by Christian theologian George Lindbeck’s categorization of ‘cultural-linguistic’ theories of religion, in which he adopts Ludwig Wittgenstein’s idea of language games (1984: 32–41). Rabbi Toba Spitzer develops a Jewish theology which is similar in approach, though she does not specifically use the term ‘language game’, in *God Is Here: Reimagining the Divine* (2022). Her inspiration for re-imagining the language of traditional Jewish metaphors for God comes from George Lakoff’s work on metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) than from Wittgenstein. This represents a promising new stream in Jewish theology, implicitly or explicitly critiquing (Fisher 2012) earlier tendencies to minimize theology and theologizing in Judaism. Ivan Marcus (1998) aptly described the medieval Ashkenazic practice of initiating Jewish boys into the study of Torah by licking honey off scriptural verses on a tablet, or eating cakes inscribed with the Hebrew letters of Torah, as ‘ritualized metaphors’. There are distinctively Jewish ways to do theology, to talk to and about God, and the ritually-embodied metaphors of culinary midrash are among the most obvious and resonant. Readers, regardless of religious background, are invited to see what God might taste like (Ps 33:9) at a Jewish meal.

### **Attributions**



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