

“Better a Meal of Vegetables with Love”: The Symbolic Meaning of Vegetables in Rabbinic and Post-Rabbinic Midrash on Proverbs 15.17

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THOUGH CLASSICAL JEWISH tradition and cuisine look meat-centered at first sight, there is a strong vegetarian undercurrent that stretches back to the garden, the Garden of Eden. Then, according to the Torah, human beings and animals coexisted harmoniously, and man had “every seed-bearing plant . . . upon the earth . . . and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit . . . all the green plants for food” (Gen 1.29–30). Only after the Flood did God grant to humans the right to consume meat: “every creature that lives shall be yours to eat, as with the green grasses” (Gen 9.3).¹ There has been a revival of interest in early dietary myth especially among contemporary Jewish activists concerned about the environment, food resources, social justice, and personal health (among them Richard Schwartz, Robert Kalechofsky, Arthur Green, and many of the contributors to the web blog *The Jew and the Carrot*).² They advocate a modern Jewish vegetarianism, or an “eco-kashrut” that more or less subscribes to Michael Pollan’s ecotarian mantra “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly

1. Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, *Shulhan Shel Arba’* in *Kitve Rabenu Babya*, ed. C. B. Chavel, (Jerusalem, 1969), 496; and see S. Daniel Breslauer, “The Vegetarian Alternative: Biblical Adumbrations, Modern Reverberations,” and Gary A. Rendsburg, “The Vegetarian Ideal in the Bible,” in *Food and Judaism: Studies in Jewish Civilization*, vol. 15, ed. L. J. Greenspoon, R. Simkins, and G. Shapiro (Omaha, Neb., 2005).

2. Roberta Kalechofsky, *Vegetarian Judaism: A Guide for Everyone* (Marblehead, Mass., 1998); Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: A Contemporary Jewish Theology* (Northvale, N.J., 1992); <http://jcarrot.org>; and Jonathan D. Brumberg-Kraus, “Does God Care What We Eat? Jewish Theologies of Food and Reverence for Life,” in *Food and Judaism*, 119–31.

plants.”³ Modern Jewish vegetarianism has its roots in the meatless utopian visions of a messianic future and Edenic past in the Bible, early and medieval rabbinic literature, and the first chief rabbi of Israel, Rav Kook.⁴ This longing to go “back to the garden” is also hinted at in several of the postbiblical interpretations of the “meal of vegetables” in Prov 15.17: “Better a meal of vegetables where there is love, than a fattened bull where there is hate.” Thus, the medieval Spanish Jewish biblical exegete Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher infers from this verse that “*it is human nature* to want small and light portions of food, such as ‘a meal of vegetables’ or something similar in the company of friends, rather than fattened bulls in the company of enemies.”⁵ Granted R. Bahya’s main emphasis here is the contrast between meals in the company of friends versus those in the company of enemies, experiences of concord rather than discord. But, in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, when there was concord between man and woman, between human beings and God, and between human beings and animals, the diet of all God’s creatures was “meals of vegetables.” After the Fall, relations broke down between human beings and God, and even between human beings and animals. Permission to indulge in a new meat diet now characterized this discord—friends became food. If it is our human nature to be satisfied with vegetables, it is nature from which we have now fallen.

What is the nature of the relationship between Proverbs’ “meal of vegetables (*yerakot*)” and the company of one’s friends? Taken in apposition to the syntactically parallel verse immediately preceding it: “Better a little with fear of the Lord, than *great wealth* with confusion” (Prov 15.16), it seems the small quantity of the “meal of vegetables” is contrasted to the substantial meal of “fattened bull.” On the other hand, the term *yerakot*, literally, “greens,” calls attention to their appearance—what they look like, and perhaps by implication, their taste, smell, and feel. According to Yehuda Feliks, a leading authority on plants in the Bible and rabbinic literature, the greens in Prov 15.17 probably refer to edible wild herbs gathered in the field, what the Mishnah later calls “field vegetables,” as opposed to those cultivated in gardens (“garden vegetables”).⁶ They might be mallow leaves (Heb., *ḥalamut*), orach (Heb., *maluoh*, for its salty

3. Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* (New York, 2008), 1.

4. Brumberg-Kraus, “Does God Care What We Eat?”

5. Bahya ben Asher, *Be’ur ‘al ha-Torah: Mugab ‘al pi defusim rishonim u-kitve yad be-tseruf be-‘arot u-mar’e mekomot* (Jerusalem, 1981), 2:376.

6. Yehuda Feliks, “Vegetables,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. C. Roth and G. Wigoder (Jerusalem, 1971), 16:82.

taste), rocket (Heb., *orot*), or *maror* (an edible weed that in Feliks's addendum to a modern commentary on the mishnaic order of Seeds [*Zera'im*] looks like dandelion greens, as well as the generic term for any bitter herb suitable for the Passover rite).⁷ This reinforces the connotation of the "meal of greens" as a low-status food of poor people, since anyone can gather "field vegetables" freely in the wild, even in times of famine.⁸ That being said, the term *yerakot* could possibly evoke the taste and mythic historical associations of the *yerakot* required for dipping, discussing, and eating as bitter herbs for rabbinic and postrabbinic Jews familiar with the rabbinic Passover seder. As it says in mPes 10.4 and 8, and in most subsequent Passover Haggadot,

On all other nights we eat many other kinds of vegetables (*yerakot*). On this night, a bitter one (*maror*) . . . The bitter herb (*maror*) that we eat, why do we eat it? Because the Egyptians embittered (*mareru*) the lives of our ancestors in Egypt, as it is said, "And ruthlessly they embittered (*ve-yimareru*) their lives with harsh labor, with mortar and bricks, and with all sorts of work in the field." (Ex 1.14)⁹

Also, the greens in Prov 15.17 probably connoted simple rather than elaborate culinary concoctions, since they could be eaten either raw or cooked (usually in a soup), as opposed to the fattened bull, which would have required much more time, effort, and skill to cook and serve. Finally, it is quite possible that biblical and postbiblical audiences would have heard the term "meal of greens" as an oxymoron, "a meal of side dishes," since vegetables were primarily a condiment in the staple biblical meal of barley bread, or the common meal of bread, oil, vegetable, and wine in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean world.¹⁰ However, later in Babylonia of the talmudic period and in the Middle Ages, vegetables such as "cabbages, turnips, colocasia, radishes, onions, and legumes such as lentils, the broad bean . . . and the cow pea" composed a more substantial portion of the

7. Ibid.; Yehuda Feliks, "Tsimḥiyat ha-mishneh," in *Shishbab sidre Mishnah ben-nikud male im perushe Rabenu Ovady. Mi-Bartenurab Ve-'ikar tosfot Yom Tov. Bi-leviyat 'Mar'ot ha-Mishnah.* Tsiyurim ve-besberim 'al ha-tsomeaḥba-bay, ha-kelim, ha-mat-be'ot ve-she'ar 'arakhim ha-ri'aliyim sheba-Mishnah (Jerusalem, 1967), 88.

8. Feliks, "Vegetables," 82.

9. See also mPes 2.6 for the vegetables that fulfill the obligation to eat bitter herbs (*maror*) on Passover.

10. John Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied: A Social History of Jewish Food* (Lanham, Md., 1993), 11; David Charles Kraemer, *Jewish Eating and Identity through the Ages* (New York, 2007), 73.

diet of the poor.¹¹ Thus the term “meal of vegetables” could also connote something quotidian, as opposed to the exceptional meal that included meat sacrificed or otherwise slaughtered only for infrequent festive occasions (unless one was very wealthy). For all the attention both the Bible and talmudic literature gave to the dietary laws about the consumption and slaughter of meat, and despite the inference of many scholars that these were laws whose main purpose was to separate Jews from gentiles, David Kraemer has suggested that they would have had surprisingly little impact on most Israelites in the biblical era and Jews in the rabbinic period, since most hardly ever had the opportunity to eat meat.¹² Referring to the rabbinic period, he says that blessings more than kosher meat laws shaped Jewish identity:

If we assume the common ancient meal was comprised of bread, oil, a vegetable, and wine, then the blessing ritual will be the only thing that regularly distinguished the eating of one group from another.¹³

Interestingly enough, the rabbinic system of blessings before eating food is concerned almost exclusively with distinguishing between different kinds of plants: “the fruit of the earth,” “the fruit of the tree,” “the fruit of the vine,” or “bread from the earth.”¹⁴ However, that phenomenon deserves a separate study. In any case, as we will now see in the interpretations of Prov 15.17, most of these connotations are at play, though in various combinations and different degrees of emphasis in their metaphorical understandings of a “meal of vegetables.”

It is typical of the midrashic impulse in Jewish tradition to take a general statement about human nature or the natural world from biblical wisdom literature and apply it to a specific instance in Jewish “history,” what scholars of midrash call “creative historiography.”¹⁵ The four texts I have chosen, selections from the Buber edition of Midrash Tanhuma, Midrash Proverbs, R. Bahya ben Asher’s Commentary on the Torah, and R. Isaiah Horowitz’s *Shne luhot ha-brit* (Two tables of the covenant), attach the vegetable verse from Prov 15.17 respectively to the story of

11. Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied*, 46.

12. Kraemer, *Jewish Eating and Identity*, 23.

13. *Ibid.*, 73.

14. Maia Brumberg-Kraus pointed this out to me in conversation.

15. Marc Bregman, “Isaak Heinemann’s Classic Study of Aggadah and Midrash,” Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, <http://carolinafilmmandvideofestival.org/rel/contacts/faculty/Heinemann.htm> (accessed July 7, 2008).

Balaam's attempt to curse the Israelites in the book of Numbers; a legend about King Solomon's loss of his kingdom; the story of Israelites' reconciliation with God after the sin of the Golden Calf; and the mystical legend that two angels accompanied by the Shekhinah visit every Jewish home on the Sabbath evening. The first two texts, though they may have been compiled in southern Italy, are composed primarily of traditions taught in the rabbinic academies of Babylonia in the ninth century C.E. R. Bahya's late thirteenth- to early fourteenth-century commentary comes from Christian Spain, and R. Isaiah Horowitz (d. 1630) came from Prague to Palestine, where he completed his book of customs and practices under the influence of Lurianic Kabbalah; it became immensely popular among both European and Middle Eastern Jews. The image of the "meal of vegetables" plays a prominent role in all of these stories as a symbol of concord between God and his people, between Israelites and non-Israelites, between male friends, and finally between man and wife. For the most part these texts look back nostalgically to a mythic past for examples of "meals of vegetables with love" versus "fattened bulls with hate."

In the first example from Midrash Tanhuma, the Holy Spirit quotes Prov 15.17 while rejecting the generous sacrificial offering of seven altars of bulls from non-Israelite prophet Balaam, whom Balak, the Moabite king, had hired to curse the Israelites in order to defeat them in battle. The midrash compares Balaam's gift to that of a dishonest moneychanger's bribe, to make the point that while a nice gift, it's a gift given in bad faith.

"And God encountered Balaam" (Num 23.4). The Holy One blessed be he said to him, "Wicked one, What are you doing?" He said to him, "I am setting up the seven altars" (Num 23.24)." It's like a moneychanger who cheats on the weights. The head of the market senses this and says to him, "Why are you stealing and cheating on the weights?" He said, "I already sent my bribe/gift to my lord's house." So too the Holy Spirit encountered Balaam, saying, "Wicked one, what are you doing?" He said him, "I am setting up the seven altars." He said, "better a meal of vegetables [where there is love, than a fattened bull where there is hate]" (Prov 15.17). A meal that Israel ate in Egypt with matzah and bitter herbs is better than the calves you are sacrificing to me out of hatred," and so, it is said, "the Lord put something (*davar*) in Balaam's mouth" (Num 23.5) — He twisted his mouth and stuck it in, like a person fixing a nail into a board.¹⁶

16. Midrash Tanhuma (Buber), *Balak*, 16.

The calves are sacrificed not so much out of Balaam's hatred for God but rather his hatred for the Israelites, whom Balaam maliciously wishes to curse in order to bring them down. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit implies that Balaam, despite his generous meat offering, doesn't love God nearly as much as the Israelites, who were satisfied eating a much more meager and less tasty meal of matzah and bitter herbs while escaping slavery in Egypt—literally, a “meal of vegetables with love.” Note the midrash's almost nostalgic look to the good old days when it was just God and his beloved Israelites together on a simple but romantic picnic of salad and crackers in the desert (the roasted lamb conspicuously absent from this memory), a sentiment still echoed in the Passover Haggadah's rather graphic (and botanical) midrashic allusion to the Exodus story “remembered” by the prophet Ezekiel:

“A numerous nation” (Deut 25.6). I let you grow like the plants of the field (*taemah ba-jadeh*). You continued to grow up until you attained womanhood, until your breasts became firm and your hair flourished (*twimeh*) [you were still naked and bare when I passed you by and saw that your time of love had arrived].” (Ez 16.7–8)¹⁷

In the ancient Israelites' lovesick imagination, you truly are what you eat! On the other hand, meals that God perceives as being served from malicious motives are reciprocated in kind, when God makes Balaam eat his words as forcefully as if they were driven through his mouth like a nail hammered through a board.

The second midrash, playing on the traditional attribution of the Book of Proverbs to King Solomon, creatively recalls the “historical” circumstances which prompted him to utter Proverbs 15 in the first place.

“Better a meal of vegetables where there is love, than a fattened bull where there is hate.” (Prov 15.17). R. Levi said, “About whom did Solomon say this verse? About two men who met him after he had lost his kingdom and was wandering from door to door looking for a job. Two men met him, who recognized him. One of them came up, prostrated himself before him, and said to him, “My lord the king, if it

17. Noam Zion and David Dishon, *A Different Night: The Family Participation Haggadah* (Jerusalem, 1997), 84, and in most traditional Passover Haggadot (omitting the line in brackets), e.g., the Rylands Haggadah (f. 25b), the Sarajevo Haggadah. The Sfat Emet Haggadah includes the bracketed lines, but in parentheses. Many modern Haggadot, especially those geared to children and families, omit some or all of these lines.

pleases you, take a meal with me today.” Immediately he went with him. He had him go up to the best seat, slaughtered a bull, had many delicacies brought to him, and began to recite to him all the things having to do with his kingdom. He said to him, “Remember how you did such and such a thing on such and such a day when you were king?” But as soon as he reminded him of the days of his kingdom, he began to cry and moan. And so it was for the whole meal until he got up and left having cried himself out. The next day, his host’s companion met him. He began to prostrate himself before him, and said to him, “My lord the king, if it pleases you, take a meal with me today.” He said to him, “Perhaps you seek to do for me as your friend did yesterday?” He said, “My lord, the king, I am a poor man, but if it pleases you, take a meal with me today of the little bit of vegetables I have.” At that very moment he went to his house. The man washed his hands and feet, brought him a little bit of vegetables, and began to console him. He said to him, “My Lord the king, the Holy One blessed be he surely swore to your father that the monarchy will never cease from your line, as it is said, “The Lord swore to David a firm oath that He will not renounce, ‘One of your own issue I will set upon your throne’” (Ps 132.11). It’s just the way of the Holy One blessed be he to rebuke and then repent from rebuking, as it is said, “For whom the Lord loves, he rebukes, as a father the son he favors” (Prov 3.12). But he will restore your kingdom to you. R. Hiyya said . . . when Solomon got his kingdom back, he wrote in his wisdom, “‘better a meal of vegetables where there is love’ which I ate at the poor man’s home, ‘than a fattened bull where there is hate’ which the rich man who reminded me of my sorrow fed me.”¹⁸

This back story both offers a more psychologically nuanced contrast between the two meals than the first midrash and explicitly stresses a connection between a “meal of vegetables” and poverty. It focuses primarily on human relations, rather than divine-human relations. The poor man can offer the former king only simple fare, and not very much of it, saying, “I am a poor man, but if it pleases you, take a meal with me today of the little bit of vegetables I have.” However, the story doesn’t imply that it wasn’t love that first moved the rich man to offer former king Solomon a great seat, slaughter him a bull, and serve it with many delicacies. The difference between the two was the quality of their company and conversation. The rich host’s conversation reminding Solomon of

18. Midrash Proverbs 15.1.

what he had lost filled him with tears, while the poor host's conversation about God's forgiveness for those he loves filled Solomon with hope. The real point of the story is that good company and tactful conversation can make even the most meager meal of greens tasty and satisfying, but a host attentive more to the meal than to the feelings of his guest can make even the finest food unpalatable. Does the story also imply that the poor are more likely to be sensitive to the feelings of others, particularly those like King Solomon who have lost everything, than the rich? No doubt, it does. In this story, the "love" and "hate" stand in for good and bad company, for care and lack thereof about our guests' feelings. This story reminds me of Brillat-Savarin's insistence that the pleasures of the table, while obviously requiring good food, are fundamentally social.¹⁹

R. Bahya b. Asher uses Prov 15.16–17 as the starting point for his poem-style introduction to the weekly Torah portion, *Pekude*, Ex 38.21–40.38, about the building of the portable tabernacle (*misbkan*) in the desert.²⁰ Implicitly and explicitly echoing the themes of the earlier traditions from Midrash Tanhuma and Midrash Proverbs,²¹ R. Bahya makes it quite clear that the love associated with the meal of vegetables correlates with "the fear of God," while the hate accompanying the fattened bull refers to the "confusion" about relying upon God when blinded by one's own wealth.²² Thus our natural human preference for "small and light eating like a meal of vegetables," teaches us

to . . . infer from it *a fortiori* what is everywhere plain to the eye. If with the love of fellow humans, human beings prefer and take pleasure in light eating over a meal of delicacies and rich foods in hateful company, how much the more so ought one to choose a little with the fear and love of the Lord, which is better than the love of any human, and than an abundance of treasuries and all the money in the world.²³

In other words, the worst sin of all is grasping materialism (*gaza*), "robbery," which R. Bahya equates with the *ḥamas*, "violent oppression," for which God destroyed all of humankind in the Flood except for Noah and

19. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. *The Physiology of Taste; or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, trans M. F. K. Fisher (San Francisco, 1986), 182.

20. Bahya ben Asher, *Be'ur*, 2:375–78.

21. Bahya ben Asher, *Be'ur*, 2:376–77, quotes the Solomon story from Midrash Proverbs and seems to allude to the other with his reference to Balaam.

22. R. Bahya picks up on the syntactic parallelism between Prov 15.16 and 15.17.

23. Bahya ben Asher, *Be'ur*, 2:376.

his family (Gen 6.13).²⁴ It not only turns human beings against one another, but makes them forget the source of their being, God—creating enmity and discord between God and all of his creatures. The simple, small meal of vegetables reminds of us our true selves in right relationship with God, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, before the Flood.

R. Bahya also adds a new dimension to the symbolic import of the meal of vegetables, by connecting it to intellectual humility.

“Better is a meal of vegetables with love” means it is better to conceive what is easy to conceive with faith in the Shekhinah, who is called “Love,” . . . “than a fattened bull”—a great conception which leads human beings astray, like what Israel conceived in the desert when they made the golden calf, where “they exchanged their glory for the image of a bull” (Ps 106.20) “with hate.” This is God’s attribute of justice, to which Moses referred when he said, “Let not your anger, Lord, blaze forth against your people.” (Ex 32.11)²⁵

Here the golden calf is the “fattened bull with hate,” set in contrast to the *mishkan* and the divine service performed there as “a meal of vegetables with love.” Moreover, the intellectual humility that comes with this meal of vegetables with love is the remedy for the damage done by “the fattened bull”—the conceptual overreaching that led to apostasy.²⁶ The Jewish torah of eating, particularly the system of blessings before and after “even a meal of vegetables,” is a sort of medical “regimen of the pleasures” to heal the “blemish of the sin and diseased soul” that Adam and Eve brought upon the human race when they first disobeyed God’s dietary instructions.²⁷

In our last midrash from Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz’s sixteenth-century book of mystical interpretations of ordinary Jewish practices, *Shne luhot ha-brit*, the meal of vegetables becomes an image of Sabbath peace, when man, woman, and God are reconciled. In reference to the legend that angels visit Jewish homes on Sabbath evening, we learn that

R. Simon b. Yohai . . . [explained] that when a man comes from the synagogue on Sabbath eve, two angels accompany him on either side, and the Shekhinah is over both of them like a mother over her children

24. Ibid., 2:375.

25. Ibid., 2:377.

26. Ibid., 2:378. (Cf. Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan*, 460.)

27. Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan*, 460, 459.

. . . And when the Shekhinah sees a candle lit, a table set and a man and his wife happy and at peace, the Shekhinah says, “This one belongs to me. He is the Jew I take pride in.” But if the Shekhinah does not go [in] . . . , then the Evil Inclination and his minions enter, and joining together they say, “This one belongs to me and my minions.” Immediately the spirit of uncleanness settles upon him, and the letter *yod* departs from the man (*ish*) and the *beb* from his wife (*ishbah*) [*yod-beb* being a short hand for God], and they are called *esh esh* “fire fire,” and what comes from them is called “unclean.” About him it is said, “Do not crave the delicacies of the mean-spirited, for his table is full of vomit and excrement.” Therefore, it is necessary to take care to welcome the Sabbath with joy and by lighting candles, and a set table and a spread couch in honor of the Shekhinah’s presence. As the *Sefer Hasi-dim* (“Book of the Pious”) puts it: “better a meal of vegetables where there is love, than a fattened bull where there is hate” (Prov 15.17)—so that a man won’t say, “I am going to buy some delicacies for the Sabbath,” knowing full well that he is quarrelling with his wife, or his father and mother, and those with him. “Better is a piece of dry bread with tranquility than a house full of the sacrifices of strife” (Prov 17.1)—whether it is the Sabbath or a festival, this is what is meant by “you shall honor it;” honor the Sabbath by not fighting on it.²⁸

Again, the meal of vegetables is a symbol of concord, this time between a family and God that truly honors the Sabbath. In this last example, the image of “the meal of vegetables with love” underlines the priority of table companions’ love for one another over the quantity, quality, and expense of the food served. It reminds me of another talmudic image of marital bliss: “When our love was strong, we could have lain together on the edge of a sword; [when it wasn’t] a bed sixty cubits wide is not big enough for us.”²⁹ The “meal of vegetables” and the “edge of sword” are both analogous metaphors for the *meager* things which love has the power to overcome. While this theme certainly recurs in all four of these “meal of vegetables” midrashim, I think they go further by suggesting a causal relationship between being satisfied by little (“just vegetables”) and being loving, especially in the story of the poor man’s meal for King Solomon, and R. Bahya’s interpretation of the meal of vegetables. Conversely, rich food and material wealth (“the fattened bull”) blind us to the importance of good relationships with our fellow human beings and with God.

28. Isaiah Horowitz, *Shne luhot ha-brit* Shabbat, perek *Ner mitvab* 33.

29. bSan 7a.

Because green vegetables were usually a substantial part of the ordinary diet in most of the venues where these stories originated, the “meal of vegetables” probably had the connotation of ordinary (versus celebratory) meals, and their meagerness was less an allusion to portion size than to how filling they were, how easy they were to prepare, and their cost. Finally, while only R. Bahya makes explicit their allusion to the vegetarian diet of humanity in Eden before the Fall and the Flood, it is hard not to see in all of these passages, shades of a nostalgic return to simpler times—the “honeymoon” in the desert, the first Passover, the days of King Solomon, the first Sabbath.

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