

## **ROSH HASHANAH SERMON by Simone Brightstein** **1 Tishrei, 5775 - 25 September, 2014**

Two years ago, Aviva asked me if I would give the sermon at one of the next High Holiday services. I blanched in horror and refused.

Last year, filled with the glow of Rosh Hashanah, I told Aviva that, if she still wanted me to, I'd speak at the High Holidays service next year. She said she was delighted. I pronounced myself insane. I identify as a Jew but my knowledge of Judaism is sketchy. Still, I love cooking for Rosh Hashanah and Passover – ah –talking about food might work.

First - research - fooling myself into thinking I was working while not actually writing anything. I combed the internet ...early history of bread... honey... wine... vinegar... the ten funniest cat videos?

Eventually I got down to writing and here, from biblical and personal points of view, is my story of food, beginning with a slice of Genesis,

On the third day, God brought forth the dry land and said: "Every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it will be yours for food." This emphasizes the sacredness of the land which is to be used with wisdom and for the benefit of all.

The first people were vegetarians, like me. Man and animal were companions, and God's commandment was to eat only fruits and vegetables. In Eden, God provided sustenance directly for Adam and Eve with only one prohibition: They could eat of every tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This story presents disobedience to God in the language of food and we all know what happened: Adam and Eve ate forbidden fruit and for this they were banished.

In post flood Genesis, God says to Noah:

"Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything, but you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it."

Why did God eventually give us the right to eat flesh? One scientific theory is that the consumption of animal protein caused a giant step forward in human evolution. I like to think it also was for a more mundane reason: perhaps we needed to master plant-based cooking before going on to fish, poultry and meat – it would have all been trial and error - there wasn't an app for any of it.

The seven species of food which personify our relationship with Israel also mark the seasons of our lives:

Tamar: date and honey, Rosh Hashanah and Sukkoth.

Rimon, pomegranate, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I never see a pomegranate without thinking of Oscar Wolfson who often used them in his magnificent photographs.

Zayit, the olive, Chanukah.

Te'ena, the fig, Tu B'Shevat

Gefen, the grape vine, Purim

Kittaw and Seorah – wheat and barley, Passover and Shavuot

My favourite Biblical food is manna – the miraculous substance that fell from the heavens to feed the Israelites during their 40 years of wandering the desert.

According to the bible it was like coriander seed. "The people gathered it, and ground it in mills or mortars, boiled it in pots, and made cakes of it; and it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil." Other sources state that no two people tasted manna the same way. That's the theory I like and I also wonder if one could influence a desired taste into it?

At the Passover at Gilgal, manna ceased on the day after they had eaten the produce of the land. The children of Israel no longer needed manna, but ate the food of the land of Canaan.

Miraculous as it may seem, manna is real.

It forms in extremely dry climates where sap flows at night and dries up in the morning. The favored source is the sap of a tamarisk tree, Shir Kesht manna. The celebrated chef Paul Liebrandt says: "the texture is unlike any other I've experienced — chewy and crunchy at the same time and intensely personal, because no two people taste manna the same way. No other ingredient is like that."

Paul Liebrandt owns The Elm in Brooklyn. My son-in-law Marc is from Brooklyn and his mother, Helen Sussman, still lives there but is with us for every High Holiday and Passover.

So - manna is real and the Sinai Desert a likely place for it. It seems to fall from the heavens, needs no cultivation and is light enough to be transported by the wind. The miracle of manna was more likely its consistent presence than its existence at all.

Another theory is that manna was the psilocybin mushroom – the magic mushroom - which may help explain the wanderings of forty years.

In Deuteronomy, the Israelites are promised "a good land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, of olive trees and honey in which you will not lack anything." The honey referred to was made not by bees, but from dates. I made some: it is delicious and, while it was cooking, it had a scent of antiquity that I found very moving.

Eating and drinking in biblical faith is more than the intake of calories and fluids. Food and drink sustain the life force breathed into humanity by God and are acts of reverence and piety. Respect for the life force is no doubt one reason why the ancient Hebrews worked out such minute regulations on the feeding of strangers and the chronically hungry.

Families, tribes, and cultures bond around the table. People who are unfriendly to each other do not eat together: Think of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: " you prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies." I understand the concept, but I'd rather have the presence of my family and friends – at the table.

Now - the more personal part of this talk.

I have a neurological trait called Synaesthesia, best described as a merging of the senses. A stimulation of one sense involuntarily creates a sensation in another sense: some people hear colours.

There are many kinds of synaesthesia and the accepted prevalence among the general population is around 4%.

I taste words and word sounds. This is known as Lexical Gustatory Synaesthesia. I have had this as long as I can remember and it is so normal to me that I thought everyone else had this “extra” sensory perception.

Dr Julia Simner, one of the world’s leading Synaesthesia experts, talks of Lexical Gustatory Synaesthesia as being “off the scale” of measurement. To famed L-G synaesthete, James Wannerton, it’s like the probability of being hit with lightning just after winning the lottery for the third consecutive week.

Eden discovered that it was an actual condition from an article on Dr. Simner in the New York Times. There is a theory that we are all born multi synaesthetic but lose the connections in childhood.

My childhood was spent in England - I was born in Birmingham, and World War II broke out when I was two years old. There are two major food memories in my early history: I don’t actually remember the first, but it was told so often that it became embedded in my mind. Rationing was very strict during the war and my father came home from the army on his first leave in great excitement – he had brought a banana for me, and had paid five pounds for it – a HUGE sum –then and now. I didn’t like it, so the poor man had to eat it himself.

The other memory I recall vividly. Like most families, we had a victory garden and a number of chickens that provided us well with eggs – except for one little hen. It was decided that she had to go and on a Friday morning, Mother and I set off to the shoichet with me sadly cradling the bird. Just as we boarded the tram, the hen laid an egg in my hand. Reprieve! “Look – an egg – we can take her back home.” My mother didn’t agree and the bird became Shabbat dinner after all.

I can’t talk of World War II without speaking of the Holocaust. Even there, food was a constant. The book, “In Memory’s Kitchen”, is a collection of recipes written and preserved by concentration camp inmates.

The history that followed the creation of this fragile book is amazing:

“The phone rang. ‘Anny Stern? I have a package for you from your mother.’ These words ended a twenty-five year journey from the Czechoslovakian concentration camp of Terezín to a Manhattan high rise.

Inside the package, which Anny couldn’t bring herself to open for 10 years, was a frail, hand-sewn manuscript from her mother, Mina Pächter, an art historian. She and her friends talked obsessively about food and, dangerously, wrote down recipes on scraps of paper. Mina died of starvation in Terezin on Yom Kippur, 1944.

In 1996, “In Memory's Kitchen” would become one of The New York Times most noteworthy books of the year.

It was edited by Cara de Silva who said: “Food is who we are in the deepest sense –the foods we associate with childhood, marriage, celebrations...to recall them in desperate circumstances is to reinforce a sense of self.”

The book records the people in Terezin and Auschwitz who spoke of food so often that there was an expression for it: ‘cooking with the mouth.’ “Everybody did it and would get very upset if they thought you made a dish the wrong way.” Jews can argue about anything – anywhere and I think, as Cara De Silva indicates, that that stubbornness may be what kept many alive.

My family was kept alive. Birmingham, being the iron and steel centre was bombed heavily and our house was destroyed early on. Luckily, we weren't in it at the time.

During the war, my mother worked with her eldest sister and was rarely home. My Aunt Jenny was one of my father's three sisters. She was virtually adopted by my mother's family and lived with us throughout the war. Aunt Jenny became my second mother and when my family and I emigrated to Canada, in 1948, Aunt Jenny followed us. She married late in life and moved to Baltimore, but she always came to us for Passover and the High Holidays.

Every eve of Rosh Hashanah, Aunt Jenny would get off the plane, dressed to the nines, with hat and gloves, holding a box containing her beloved apple cake – it was never packed in her luggage. When we got home, it was time for tea and apple cake. The sight of it – high and burnished bronze, the fragrance of it, sweet with cinnamon and sugar, the moist perfection of it, made, not with butter, but with oil, for it to be parve – Aunt Jenny's apple cake meant Rosh Hashanah was here. Sadly, Aunt Jenny is no longer here, but Eden still makes her cake and it always means the High Holidays to me.

In my married life, whenever my husband and I visited England, we would tour the country by car, exploring one village after another, Often they'd be getting ready for the annual flower show or some other kind of fete and I used to watch the women dressing tables and hanging bunting and I'd wish I was one of them.

Years ago, while living part time in Bath, I was taken by friends to nearby Bradford On Avon - a little mediaeval town.

It became a special place to me and I used to say if I didn't live in Bath, I'd live in Bradford On Avon. When my husband and I separated, I returned to England. I had always missed it and knew that there, my life would be rebuilt. By great good luck, I found a place in Bradford On Avon.

Many in the arts have left major cities and settled in this tiny town. A dear friend of mine once said, when she was in an emergency situation, Bradford On Avon is small enough for one to lurch easily from crisis to crisis.

Soon after moving there, I became involved in fund raising to rebuild the ancient West Barn, destroyed by fire years before. Our first event was a street party and, as I stood in the centre of Church Street, directing Dan from the hardware store where to attach the bunting, I realized: Oh – I am one of those women!"

And yet, I wasn't. I was in a very WASP environment and became acutely aware of being Jewish –it seems I was the only Jew in the village. Later, I discovered two others of Jewish ancestry, Simon Relph, former President of BAFTA, producer of such acclaimed films as "Enchanted April" and "Reds" and the artist Michael Simpson, whose massive canvasses often contain religious symbolism

My deepened sense of myself as a Jew didn't come through exclusion. The people of the town accepted me and I held two celebrations after being there for a year: First, a Seder. I lived in what was part of the old Bell Inn. My living room had been the skittles lane so the length was perfect for a Seder table and I used the Haggadah that Eden had written. One of the guests, was Jewish by birth but not in practice. She has three sons, the eldest of whom married a Roman Catholic woman and their three children were brought up in that religion. Still, they wanted to come to my Seder and traveled from London to do so. Their eldest child, Jacob, was 10 years old. Another friend had brought me a beautiful guest book that she had hand-crafted. The next

day, as I read the remarks I saw that Jacob had written: “this evening will always stay in my head.” I was very touched by that.

The other gathering was for Rosh Hashanah. A dear friend who collected Cornish pottery brought me an exquisite little bowl glazed in a beautiful blue. That evening I used it to hold honey and everyone liked the tradition of dipping apples into it.

Shir Libeynu is, for me, a microcosm of Bradford On Avon – it’s also filled with artists of all genres and, is all-inclusive. Several congregants visited me there: Eden came several times, the first with Jacob and Zohar, Michelle Gewartz, who was at the University of Leeds, visited often, and Maria Meindel stayed with me while researching for her book “Outside The Box.” Outside Shir Libeynu, my son Josh, my daughter-in-law, Lisa and their 6-month-old Addison came, and my nephew Damon and his Amy, as well as many friends.

Shir Libeynu has added greatly to my life and I thank all of you, from Aviva, who leads us so courageously and who gave me such generous help during the writing of this sermon, to Daniela, who exquisitely orchestrates the soundtracks of our services, to my fellow congregants, each of whom brings their own flavour and to Eden, who introduced me to this unique congregation.

Each of us has our own recipe for life: we’re constantly stirring and seasoning and some days the dish turns out perfectly –some days it falls flat – or even scorches but, what it boils down to - no apologies for the pun - is that our dishes change from day to day; from sweet to savory – sometimes even to bitter. Ultimately, hopefully, we nourish those we care for – including ourselves.

My last crumb of food knowledge is this: The table grace is the world’s most common form of prayer. I offer the following:

All living things struggle for life and are sacrificed for our well being. The food is One, which we receive from God’s bounty. May its divine energy lend us health and may this food be blessed to our nourishment. We dedicate this meal to our hopes and dreams and ask your blessing for the hands that grew this food which we appreciate while remembering those who are hungry. Thank you for feeding us and may all have enough today.

. This grace comes from the following sources:

Anglican  
Buddhist  
First Nations  
Hindu  
Jewish  
Muslim  
Non Denominational  
Pagan  
Roman Catholic  
Unitarian

While jig sawing these prayers into some sort of order, I realized how deeply ingrained is the worldwide knowledge that food is the greatest gift. There is no deeper act of love than to feed people... family, friends or a homeless person on the street. Please feed each other.