



JUBILO

CONFLICT PREVENTION, ETHNIC INTEGRATION AND PEACE BUILDING
THROUGH INTERFAITH DIALOGUE



F O O D

IN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

A C O M P A R A T I V E A P P R O A C H



SPANDA

TEA FOR PEACE

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TEA FOR PEACE

SECTION THREE



FOOD

*IN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM
A COMPARATIVE APPROACH*



SPANDA

C O N T E N T S



TEA FOR PEACE
*Marriage, Sexuality, Food, War, Death
in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.
A comparative approach.*

Section 3 - Food

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E D I T I N G

REBECCA BENTLEY

EATING IS ONE OF THE MOST BASIC NEEDS OF LIFE. IT IS THEREFORE NO SURPRISE THAT rituals surrounding food are central to the daily lives of the believers. Rituals relating to food, its procurement, preparation and consumption, have universally been made the subjects of many ceremonies. Food itself has been endowed with a rich symbolism traceable in almost every culture. In early human societies the gathering of food was the main activity that took up the most waking hours of all humans, and rituals stemmed from the inclination to rejoice and give thanks for the life sustaining yields the Earth bequeathed. In its most symbolical social role, food is a powerful tool: it gathers and unifies families, tribes and cultures around the table, while refusing to eat with others is a clear sign of enmity.

Food and dietary practices play an important role in all religions, including the three Abrahamic faiths. These practices are deeply embedded in the daily lives of the followers and especially in celebratory occasions. Food functions as a powerful symbol representing national, ethnic, and religious identities, and dietary practices express the drive of people to fulfil the will of Y_h_w_h, God, Allah (God) and to demonstrate their devotion. These two concepts are intertwined and represent the diverse worldviews and value systems in different cultures. Moreover, food and dietary practices are associated with certain religious rituals, particularly during sacred events, which unite believers within their communities.

F O O D S Y M B O L I S M

Each faith has given specific symbolic connotations to food. Many of these symbols are used in relation to celebrations, ceremonies, and daily rituals. The symbolism of food reminds the believers of life, their faith and practice. Most food symbolism originates from the analogy between food and life, and food prescriptions and rules from the human need to always bear in mind the existence of a superior entity, who sets limits on where it is not possible to go beyond.

¶ In Judaism, symbolism of food is extremely rich and extended. Blood is symbolic of life, and its consumption is forbidden. At the Passover dinner (*Pesah Seder*) there is typically a plate with a variety of food items on it. Every item of food has

a precise and distinguished meaning: the unleavened bread (*matzah*) refers to the Jews escaping from Egypt, and not having had the time to let the bread raise; the bitter vegetables (celeries) dipped in salt water represent the hardship and tear they suffered as slaves in Egypt; the *Haroset* – a mixture of apples, cinnamon, nuts and raisins – refers to the building mixture they used for construction, as slaves, in Egypt; the shank bone represents the sacrificial lamb offered to God in ancient times as Passover sacrifice; the egg is a symbol of life; and the bitter herb, usually horseradish, represents the bitterness of slavery.

8 The symbolism of food related to the social aspect of the dietary law was originally acted upon as an identity control device when incursion by other tribes and their gods was a frightening possibility. In this context, to be holy is to be wholly separated. It is maintained that food rules originated from the desire to be *clean* and be separated from other people (*goyim*). Israelites were *clean* because they remained within the bounds of God's covenant, not mixing with outsiders, with their gods or their customs. This separation was reinforced by dietary restrictions such as the prohibition of eating pork.

Another strong symbolism is associated with salt, as it never spoils or decays, it is therefore symbolic of the human eternal covenant with God, which is referred to in verse as “the salt of your God's covenant.” In Judaism the table is considered an altar, and in the Holy Temple salt was offered together with every sacrifice (Leviticus 2:13). In the Hebrew Bible, thirty-five verses mention salt, one of which being the story of Lot's wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt when she looked back at the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as the Lord destroyed them. A very strong social connotation to the deeper relationship between food and spirituality can be traced down in the mystic Hasidism branch.

9 In Christianity, blood is symbolic of life and represents the sacrifice of Christ to gain eternal life for his people. In the ritual of the Communion, wine is symbolic of Christ's blood, and bread represents his body. Water is associated with life, therefore with Christ, and many references to water in the Old Testament are believed to revolve around the baptism that joins a newborn to Christ. Since the commandments of God bring life, water is also associated with the commandments.

The deepest symbolism relating to food is found in the Easter meal. White decorated Easter eggs symbolise immortality, rebirth and the grave and resurrection of Christ. Red eggs represent the blood of Christ, whose sacrifice redeemed human sins and are traditionally dyed by boiling them with the skin of red onions or bark. Lamb, the traditional main dish in the Easter meal, refers directly to Christ, the Lamb of God. Fish is one of the most important symbols of

Christ. In early Christianity, when Christians worshipped in secret places because of persecution, fish were painted on the outside door of a house to let other believers know that they would be safe and welcome inside. Finally, apples represent sin, possibly due to the similarity between the Latin words *malum* (apple) and *malus* (sin). Apples are identified as the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that was eaten by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, which, in turn brought sin into this world. The New Testament has six verses mentioning salt. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus referred to his followers as the “salt of the earth”. The apostle Paul encouraged Christians to “let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt.” Salt is mandatory in the liturgy of the Tridentine Mass, the Roman Rite Mass celebrated exclusively in Latin. Salt is used in the third item (which includes an exorcism) of the Celtic rite of the consecration of a church. Salt may be added to the water “where it is customary” in the Catholic rite of the Holy water. Salt is both metaphorically and literally used in Old and New Testament to guide followers.

9 In Islam, the consumption of blood is forbidden as it represents the essence of life. The sacredness of life is matched with the spiritual need to acknowledge its destruction in any of God's creatures. This is specifically expressed in the prayer over an animal to be slaughtered for food. This act serves as consecration, purification and preparation of animal flesh for its transformation into human substance capable of conscious awareness of God. It is an affirmation that the taking of life is a serious matter that ought to occur only with divine permission. Food also has very significant symbolic meaning in marriages, it can represent the status and wealth of the bride and the groom families.

One of the deepest relations between food and spirituality is to be found in the Sufi mysticism that details a code of manners and conduct instructions at meals and with guests. For example, one should eat in the company of others whenever possible, whether informally with companions, graciously with guests, or generously with the poor, and always with impeccable courtesy. More rules include: eat only when hungry and stop before becoming full; eat using only three fingers of the right hand and look only at his own morsel; while eating, do not drink unless extremely thirsty and, drink only as much as to moisten the liver; one should not eat large mouthfuls, and should chew the food well and not make haste; once finished eating, one should give praise to God and wash the hands. Sufi insights point to potential nourishment in a meal beyond the bulk and chemical composition of the food. The senses are nourished by impressions arising from attention to the appearance, texture, flavour and aroma of food. Even subtler is the nourishment activated when food is prepared and eaten in a state of presence and love, and such nourishment feeds all

centres of a human being, for the quality of food influences the inner body. A saying (*hadith*) of the prophet Muhammad reports: “Salt is the master of your food. God sent down four blessings from the sky: fire, water, iron and salt.”

These rules have both a practical and a symbolic meaning. On the practical side, the use of the right hand for eating is a hygienic measure born of cultural necessity. On the symbolic side, it carries the symbolism of right and left. The right is associated with goodness, happiness, cleanliness, purity, blessedness, and consciousness of God, and the left is associated with the opposite qualities. This imagery suggests the choices that can be made by creatures with will and intelligence. Moreover, the act of sharing food promotes remembrance of unity, and the interrelatedness of all creation.

On special occasions certain foods take on symbolic significance. For instance, at the Istanbul Qadiri centre (*dergah*) on the last Tuesday of the month of *Ramadan* – one of the five pillars of Islam, also including the profession of faith (*Shahada*), the five daily prayers (*Salah*, namely, *Fajr*, *Dhuhr*, *Asr*, *Maghrib* and *Ishā'a*), the giving of alms (*Zakāt*), and the pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*) – seven dishes are served: soup is a reminder of the importance of water to life; meat and vegetables symbolize the earth; the meat and vegetables rolled in dough (*pilaf* and *borek*) represent fire; eggs with cured meat (*pastirma*) signify the divine generative power, combining the feminine symbol of the egg with the salty masculinity of the meat; and the rose-scented pastry boiled in milk (*gullac*) is a symbol of Divine love. One motif of food symbolism is the association of certain colours with happiness and festivity. The three most widely-recurring such colours in Muslim cultures are *yellow*, the colour of sunlight, narcissi, and springtime hillsides full of blossoming mustard flowers; *green*, the sign of birth, regeneration, and Islam; and *white*, symbolic of brightness, happiness and hope. Yellow rice is an integral part of any festive Indonesian menu, and yellow rice pudding (*shollehzard* or *kheer*) is served on many festive occasions in Iran and Pakistan. The Iranian vernal equinox celebration (*Noruz*) is always accompanied by foods with fresh green herbs, and families set out pots of growing greens on their windowsills during the season preceding the festival. In Turkey, it is believed that on the springtime festival (*Hidirellez*) a walk in a green field, or eating fresh lettuce, onions, green plums or any other green food, will bring a special refreshment and rejuvenation. White foods – eggs, milk, yogurt, cheese, rice pudding, stuffed cabbage and pilaf – are eaten during festivals because white is believed to be the colour of clothing the twin brothers Khidr and Elijah wore on the day of their first meeting after their separation. It is thought that those who wear white clothing and eat white food might spend the year in happiness and hope.

In each of the Abrahamic faiths there are three significant reasons for the prohibition of certain foods: practical; moral; and symbolic. In the past, there existed an overriding concern involving food consumption, with dietary prescriptions aimed at preventing the spread of illness and disease. Moral prohibitions refer to the sacred texts of each faith. The Bible, the Torah and the Qur'an strongly reproach alcohol, as it leads to the loss of self-control and the violation of social relationships, thus contradicting the principles of the faiths. Blood is considered a vehicle of emotions and the source of life, this is why Judaism and Islam both forbid its consumption, as the emotions of the slaughtered animal and some traits of its character are believed to be transferred to humans through its absorption. Pigs are regarded as the filthiest of animals, and therefore Muslims and Jews are forbidden to eat pork.

- ¶ In Judaism, the main dietary law (*kashrut*) serves as a daily exercise in self-discipline. It divides food into the categories of the fit (*kosher*) and the unfit (*treif*). *Kosher* food refers to food such as fruits, vegetables, fish with fins, wine produced by Jews, cheese, the 'fore quarter' of cattle, and artiodactyls mammals (cows, goats, sheep, wild deer, elk, etc.) that are slaughtered ritually. Milk and dairy products from cows, goats and sheep are also allowed, but should not be cooked or eaten with meat products. Grains and cereals are *kosher*, as well as eggs from specific birds. Blood, swine, rabbit, shellfish, wild hen, duck and birds of prey are considered *treif* and their consumption is forbidden. It is believed that the utensils used to prepare and serve *treif* foods can also become unfit. Therefore separate towels and potholders are used to avoid the unlawful mixing of ingredients. The rules of eating *kosher* vary slightly between different denominations and individual practices. The ease of one's ability to keep *kosher* depends on the denomination and community in which one lives. A marketplace has evolved to satisfy these dietary needs, products are identified and certified by a rabbi or organisation as *kosher* and are labelled with a mark (*bekhsber*). The process does not involve the blessing of the food, but rather examining the ingredients, preparation and facilities to ensure the implementation of *kosher* standards.
- ¶ In Christianity, scriptures tell the story of the first humans who sinned by eating the forbidden apple which brought mortality to humankind. For Christians food is seen as a form of temptation, they are taught not to be gluttonous and not to eat more than they need. While Old Testament forbids the consumption of pork, as pigs are considered filthy animals, the New Testament states that with the death and resurrection of Jesus everything was cleansed and the prohibition of eating pork was no longer necessary. Alcohol consumption is not encouraged

and is reproached in both the New and the Old Testaments. Prescriptions exist for the ritual abstention from meat, eggs and dairy products on sacred days, such as Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday and All Souls Day.

¶ In Islam, the Qur'an makes a distinction between lawful (*halal*) and unlawful (*haram*) foods. *Halal* designates any object or action permissible to use or engage in, whereas *haram*, refers to the 'forbidden.' *Halal* also relates to the behaviour one has in life, such as the kind-heartedness that is obligatory for all Muslims. *Haram* foods include pork, animals not slaughtered under Muslim guidelines, blood, alcohol, carnivorous animals, birds of prey, land animals without external ears (snakes, reptiles, worms or insects), glands, testicles, brains, gall bladders, spleen and eyeballs. Food that is not *haram* is considered *halal* and can be consumed. In order to maintain the Islamic requirements, a labelling system called the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) has been established to identify *halal* products. It involves examining and analysing every step of a food production process and, where that is not possible, Muslim butchers are trusted to be truthful.

The strictest prohibition in the Qur'an is on alcohol. Muslims maintain that intoxicating beverages make people lose respect for themselves and God, and lose their inhibitions and principles, causing them to commit evil deeds.

GENDER & FOOD

In all Abrahamic faiths women's roles have been historically to prepare her family's daily diet, while the men act as the supplier of such food. The foods prepared and served to their families and guests carry ethnic and religious identities and values that have been formed over many years. Food preparation can also signify social status and gender. For immigrants of these religions, women provide most, if not all, of the work securing supplies, preparing and cooking the food, and serving it. The knowledge of food preparation is also passed down to their daughters continuing traditions in new surroundings. The manipulation of food became an important form of expression for women to maintain control in the male-dominated societies.

¶ Traditional Judaism clearly defines roles for men and women in a patriarchal matrilineal manner that is believed to suit their different emotional make-ups. A woman's primary role is centred in the home, as she is the foundation of the home (*akeret HaBayit*). This includes maintaining the home's physical and spiritual integrity through housekeeping, cooking, and child rearing. One specific tradition is for women to make every week the *challah*, the special bread prepared

for the seventh day of the creation of the world on which God rested (*Shabbat*). By keeping a *kosher* home, a Jewish woman's role as homemaker accrues her merit because she is seen as the enabler of her family and her husband to learn Torah. Elderly Jewish women with little literacy and education follow strongest the traditional rituals surrounding food. For them the treatment of food is one source to gain power and a means of religious expression.

¶ Christians do not recognize dietary restrictions, and thus women do not oversee daily control over dietary religious rituals and practices of their families. However, they still find ways to express this control through food on religious celebrations, fasting and alms giving. In Medieval Europe, women used fasting and devotion to religious practice as a means of escape from their role as food preparer or nurturer. Additionally, fear of the female body drove several Christian cultures to sanctify the renunciation of food and the promotion of religious and spiritual fasts. Female fasting has also been associated with the rejection of the female sexual body, holding that the fasting body made virgins more attractive to Christ, their bridegroom. A parallel has been drawn between the patriarchal legacy of Christianity, which associates women with sin and bodily cravings, and the cultural preference for a thin female body. These complementary forces form a popular salvation myth that encourages girls and women to fixate on their bodies and engage in disordered eating patterns.

¶ Women in Islam traditionally prepare the large meals for all religious occasions and take food to cemeteries on major holidays, thereby regulating the religious practices and traditions each family upholds. In Middle-Eastern Muslim communities, food preparation is work for women. In fact, anything related to the kitchen, including the cooking utensils, are regarded as the property of the female householder who has acquired them as part of her trousseau (*jihaz*), or from a female relative. Moreover, any space in the home where food is prepared – the kitchen, the cooking fire, and the clay oven (*tannur*) – is considered pre-eminently female, and is normally not accessible to male outsiders. For many Muslims, cooking is a communal act where women gather to prepare a variety of dishes and socialize, however, outside the home, men are typically in charge of the preparation and serving of food and drink.

FOOD PREPARATION & RITUALS

In Judaism, cooking is a sacred activity because through cooking followers can honour God in their daily lives and perform a number of central rituals within their faith. Traditionally, women prepare the food, and food preparation plays an important role in forming and preserving religious identity. Significant occasions,

such as births, marriages, and death incorporate various formal, private and communal dietary rituals, signifying that life is not a random process. Food preparation must be carried out according to *kosher* dietary law. The act of slaughtering as part of a ritual in food preparation has its own specific rules (*shechita*). The animal must be healthy and killed with respect and compassion by a ritual slaughterer (*shochet*). This is performed by cutting the animal's throat by drawing a very sharp knife horizontally across it and draining out the blood. The meat is then salted until the blood is drained out completely.

14 ¶ Food preparation for feasting bears symbolic meaning. The preparation of food to honour the holy eight-day festival of Passover (*Pesah*) that celebrates the escape of the Nazirites from the oppression of Egyptian pharaohs is essential to the festivity. On this occasion, it is strictly forbidden to eat leavened food, and flat baked wafers (*matzah*) made solely from flour and water replaces bread. One month before Passover, during the *Purim* festival to commemorate the deliverance of the Jewish people from a plot to annihilate them, women ceremonially clean the wheat for the bread sorting it grain by grain seven times, as it is believed that seven is an auspicious number, to make sure that all the grains are of good quality. Food is also central to the celebration of the *Sabbath*; it begins at sundown on a Friday and ends at sundown on the Saturday. On *Sabbath*, the head of the household, or any male over 13 years of age, recites the ceremonial prayer (*kiddush*) over the ceremonial wine. As the Torah prohibits the lighting of fire and cooking food during the *Sabbath*, the cooked *Sabbath* food, such as a dish made of potatoes and vegetables (*cholent*, by Ashkenazi Jews, *hamin* by Sephardic and Yemenite Jews) must be prepared on Friday afternoon. When performing *kiddush* at the *Sabbath* it is recommended to have either salty bread or to add salt to the bread if the bread is unsalted and, to preserve the covenant with God, it is customary to spread salt over the bread or to dip the bread in salt when passing it around the table.

¶ In Christianity, the ritual preparation of food takes place during holydays when believers commemorate important religious events. The biggest holydays are celebrated with large feasts. The birth of Jesus is honoured with a special dinner at the home of the head of the family where all its components are gathered. In the Orthodox tradition, to represent the event, this dinner takes place in a barn or a stable and is held at the end of the Christmas fast. The meal must be free of meat or dairy products, and there should be either 7, 9, 11 or 13 different dishes – related to the symbolism of the odd numbers, universally considered more godlike, more perfect and more powerful than the even – and a special loaf of bread is prepared with a coin inside it. Starting with the oldest, the head of the family ‘breaks’ the bread and shares

the pieces out amongst the family. Whoever receives the piece containing the coin is appointed the King or the Queen of Christmas, or a chivalry of the knighthood of Heaven, and is believed to subsequently benefit from good fortune throughout the year.

¶ According to Islamic dietary laws, embodied in the *hadith*, animals must be slaughtered in a specific way considered merciful and less painful. The blood has to drain from the animal as the Qur’an forbids its consumption. One of the most significant rituals of food preparation is the sacrifice of animals enacted for the feast (*Eid al-Fitr*) at last day of the *Ramadan*, for the Prophet’s Birthday (*Mawlid an-Nabi*) and for the Abraham’s Sacrifice Day (*Eid al-Adha*), which follows the annual pilgrimage (*hajj*).

H A N D W A S H I N G

The ritual of hands washing before and after eating is well known and practised in all Abrahamic faiths.

¶ In Judaism, the Babylonian Talmud describes two types of washing at meals: before, the “first waters” (*mayim rishonim*); after, the “last waters” (*mayim acharonim*). The former term has generally fallen from contemporary usage and has been replaced by “washing of hands” (*Ntillat yadayim*); the latter is still in use. Washing hands before meals is normative in Orthodox Judaism. The commentaries (*Gemarrah*) of the Babylonian Talmud contain homiletic descriptions of the importance of the practice, including the argument that washing before meals is so important that neglecting it is tantamount to unchastity, and risks divine punishment in the form of sudden destruction or poverty. The discussion contains the suggestion that of the two washings, the *mayim acharonim*, as a health measure, is the more important of the two, on the ground that the salt used as a preservative in food could cause blindness if the eyes were rubbed without washing. Although *mayim acharonim* was once not widely practiced – it did not appear until recently in many Orthodox *Haggadah of Pesah*, the texts that sets out the order of the ritual of Passover – it has nowadays undergone a revival and has become more widely observed, particularly for the *Shabbath* meal and for other holidays. Conservative Judaism has supported discontinuing the practice of *mayim acharonim* on the grounds that the rabbis of the Talmud instituted it as a health measure and, since modern foods no longer contain preservatives so dangerous as to cause blindness upon contact with the eyes, washing the hands after meals is no longer required and can be discontinued.

The standard Passover *Seder*, the ritual feast that marks the beginning of the holiday, has an additional third washing to be performed prior to eating the

maror (the bitter herbs which symbolize the bitterness of slavery), because it is considered an act of eating separate from the meal. Orthodox Judaism considers only two washings, one before and one after the meal, while outside orthodoxy only the one before the meal (*mayim rishonim*) is generally performed. In both cases, *mayim rishonim* is traditionally performed with a blessing, immediately followed by the blessing over the bread.

16 ¶ In Christianity, it is argued that hand washing originated in the Greco-Roman practice and was promoted by the Pharisees along with other purity laws, but stands in contrast to the biblical priestly purity system. In the logion “there is nothing outside a person which by going into him can defile him, rather the things which come out of a person are what defile him” (Mark 7.15), Jesus rejects the Pharisees’ conception of ritual purity, which was designed to guard the self from impurity. The Pharisees were very insistent on scrupulously washing their hands before meals and abstaining from food bought unwashed from the market. Two points enrich the understanding of hand washing in its original context. First, according to early rabbinic sources, a set of laws relating to ritual contamination was introduced together with the custom of hand washing. Seen as a system, these regulations reflect a particular understanding of ritual impurity that corresponds to the first part of the logion (‘that which enters a person’). Jesus contended that these laws, concerned as they were with eating only in a state of ritual purity, were not biblical in origin, but rather were a Pharisaic innovation that reflected a new understanding of ritual contamination, one that changed the focus and significance of ritual purity. Second, the cultural origin of the hand-washing custom lays in Greco-Roman practice, and not in the priestly purity laws. This factor shed light on the novel understanding of purity rejected by Jesus.

Currently, the ritual of hands washing before meals is not relevant in the Christian tradition, but it is practised as a normal measure of the modern hygienic standard as Christians commonly wash ceremonially before eating and after eating, and often between courses.

¶ In Islam, believers are required to perform a partial ablution (*wudu*) before some rituals and prayers, before touching the Qu’ran, and before touching food. This is related with the Muslims’ need for cleanness and holiness, and keeping with the rules of cleanliness and neatness of mind that parallels the cleanliness of the hands before starting the meal. Islam places great emphasis on physical and spiritual cleanliness, the Qu’ran recites that God “loves those who turn to Him in repentance and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean” (2:222) and offers specific instruction on when and how hand

cleansing should occur, to this end, it is important to clean oneself after eating by washing the hands, rinsing the mouth and, if possible, cleaning the teeth.

M E A L T I M E P R A Y E R

Sharing food is one of the most universal cultural experiences and expressing thanks for food is one of humankind’s first acts of worship. For believers, food is considered to be the gift of life received from above. In every culture there are beliefs or commandments that require honouring the giver of life – God or the divine principle – through acknowledging the sacred gift of food. It is a shared understanding among the Abrahamic faiths that by admitting humankind to his table, God became bound to his creation in a unique relationship and that, by admitting God to the table of humanity, humans can experience the love and beauty of that relationship. As food is central to all cultures and religions – and has always been recognized as a gift from God embodying the supreme and universal bond of all friendship – the ensuing giving grace for this loving generosity is present in all religions and faiths.

17 ¶ In Judaism, the giving of grace is expressed through an extremely wide variety of prayers and blessings that differentiate one from another according to five categories of food. First, Judaism assigns particular importance and gives specific blessings when the meal includes bread made from wheat, barley, rye, oats, or spelt. Such an occasion requires ritual hand washing and a blessing (*motzi*) beforehand consumption. Additionally, there is the Blessing for Sustenance, also called The Grace After Meals (*Birkat HaMazon*) at the end of the meal. Every meal or snack that does not involve the consumption of bread requires the *motzi* and the *Birkat HaMazon*, and different appropriate blessings for each of the five categories of foods other than bread, namely: *mezzonot*, for cereals, cakes, cookies, crackers, pie, pastry; *hagafen*, for grape wine & grape juice; *ha-eitz*, for fruits that grow on trees, nuts, dates, grapes, raisins, figs, cherries, pomegranates, olives, olive oil, etc.; *ha-adamah*, for vegetables, fruits that grow from the ground, cultivated herbs, beans, corn, strawberries, raspberries, pineapples, bananas, melons, whole rice and millet, peanuts, sunflower seeds, rose hips, etc.; and *shehakol*, for meat, fish, eggs, dairy, water, mushrooms, juices, coffee, tea, beer, other beverages, inferior uncultivated produce, spoiled produce, wild herbs, etc. *Shehakol* is also a generic blessing for everything that does not rate a special blessing of its own. If the snack includes several different foods that require the same blessing (eg. an apple and some nuts), only one blessing is required to cover all the foods. After eating or drinking, one recites a short Blessing After (*B’racha Acharonah*) that has two forms depending on what

foods has been eaten: the Threefold Blessing (*B'racha Mei-ein Sha-losb*) for foods the that the Torah associates with the Land of Israel (*mezzonot, hagafen* and the five fruits: dates; figs; pomegranates; olives; and grapes), and the Creator of Souls (*Bo-rei N'fa-shot*) for everything else.

¶ In Christianity, to give a prayer before a meal is not a compulsory practice, but many believers follow the old held tradition of saying a prayer or a verse of gratitude before starting a meal on the account of Jesus' last supper with his disciples when he lifted the elements and gave thanks to God before passing out the bread and cup. The Gospels also record (Matthew 14 and 15; Mark 6 and 8; Luke 9; and John 6) that before the miracles of the loaves and fish, Jesus broke the bread and gave thanks before distributing them among the people. Therefore, food is considered the most conspicuous and constant reminder of God's loving care and beneficent provision for a believer wants and needs, the continuance of life and all that life means. If at any time of the day public thanksgiving is to be expressed to God, it should be at meal prayer time. Grace before meals is also an indispensable mode of testimony to the bountiful sustenance given by the Almighty.

¶ In Islam, prayers are believed to bring believers closer to God, and they should be performed at five specific times of the day. Despite the fact that there aren't specific blessing dedicated to food, giving thanks before and after the consumption of a meal is expressly stated in the Qur'an: "Eat of your Lord's provision, and give thanks to Him" (34:15), and "If you are thankful, surely I will increase you." The *Basmalah*, the collective name of the whole of the recurring Islamic prayer-formula *Bism Allah ar-rahman ar-rahim* (In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate) that constitutes the first verse of the 113 chapters (*suras*) of the Qur'an, is never omitted before a meal. As a sign of unity and to strengthen the relationship between family members, at dinner all the dishes are put on the round table and all members start together. The meal is never ended without uttering the *Hamdalah* (*Alhamdulillah*, All praise belongs to God) – similar to the Hebrew *Halelu Yah*, Alleluia – the required ending response to the *Basmalah*.

F A S T I N G

Fasting is the voluntary abstinence from food for a specific period of time. As an expression of penitence, mourning or devotion, it is considered an exercise of discipline to resist temptations, an act of atonement for sins and cleansing the body of evil and impurities.

¶ In Judaism, the fast is the total withdrawal from all food and drink and is considered a spiritual cleansing at both individual and communal level. A full day fast begins at sunset and continues until sunset the following day. There are two essential purposes for a fasting day (*Tisha B'Av*), the absolution of the daily sins and the commemorative mourning for the destruction of the First and Second temples in Jerusalem. Personal fasts are undertaken as penance for sin. A bride and a groom may fast on their wedding day in order to begin their marriage in a state of purity. Fasting is also performed on the anniversary of the death of a family member or teacher (*yahrzeit*). The most important fast is kept on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), during which people confess their sins and seek forgiveness from their fellowmen. Besides eating and drinking, the prohibition also includes bathing, washing, shaving, wearing cosmetics, and anointing. As *Yom Kippur* is a twenty-four hour total fast, very devout worshippers spend the entire day in prayer.

¶ Christian fasting and abstinence can be either a purely personal and voluntary matter or a social event for a special occasion. It is performed as an abstinence not only from food or drink, but also from sexual intercourse, celebrations or other pleasurable activities. The institution of fasting is a commandment for all Christians dating back to the beginning of Christianity. Early monastic communities enforced abstinence from meat, milk, eggs and wine. For Catholics, fasting usually means the restriction of food between meals or abstaining from food altogether for a set period of time. Wednesday and Friday fasts had previously been universal customs, but nowadays only the Friday fast is maintained, where meat is prohibited in Catholic and Anglican practices. The four major fasting seasons are the Nativity fast, lasting for forty days before Christmas; the Apostle's Fast (which varies in length); the Dormition Fast (lasting for two weeks); and the Great Lent, which starts forty days before Easter. This last is the most important fasting season as it is considered an opportunity for self-examination and demonstrates dedication to the faith. Meat, dairy products, fish, wine, and oil are abstained from during this season.

¶ In Islam there are three types of fasting (*Saum*): ritual fasting; fasting as compensation for repentance; and ascetic fasting, all observed from dawn until sunset. Ritual fasting is an obligatory act commemorating the month in which the Qur'an was revealed to the prophet Muhammad and is performed during the month of *Ramadan*. It is believed that during this period the gates of heaven are opened and that hell is closed, and that on the Night of Power (*Laylat al-Qadr*) – commemorating, in one of the odd-numbered days in the last ten of the month, the anniversary of the night the first verses of the Qur'an were

revealed – the angels come down to Earth (97:1-5) to assign to the fasting believer his/her individual destiny for the year to come. Aged, infirm, travelling, pregnant, or nursing Muslims are exempt from doing *Ramadan*. Children before puberty are also exempt, but many Muslim parents gradually start their children fasting at a young age, so that in childhood they begin to learn the spiritual benefits, strength of will, and the meaning of adult religious commitment that come from this practice. During *Ramadan* it is prohibited to smoke and engage in sexual intercourse, and worshippers must rise before dawn to pray. They stop eating and drinking for the first prayer (*fajr*) and continue to fast until the fourth prayer of the day (*maghrib*). At sunset, the family gather to share the fast-breaking meal (*iftar*) which starts with the ritual eating of a date – as the prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is believed to have done – and is permitted to eat and drink until the next morning *fajr*. The practice is balanced, rewarding, and motivating and is exercised for self-discipline, self-control, sacrifice, and to show sympathy for those who are less fortunate.

In some inner circles, especially among the Naqshbandi, one of the major Sufi (*tasawwuf*) spiritual orders (*tariqa*) of Islam, fasting throughout the year on Monday (believed to be under the influence of the Moon) and Thursday (considered to be under the influence of Jupiter) is a powerful practice to address issues respectively related to the affectivity realm and to the will.

F O O D & H E A L T H

¶ In Judaism, the 12th century *Mishneh Torah*, that still carries canonical authority as a codification of Talmudic law, explains the rationale for being healthy, and the human obligation to keep minds and bodies fit. “Since a healthy and whole body is in keeping with the service to God, since it is impossible to understand or know anything about God when one is sick, therefore one must distance himself from those things which ruin the body and instead should accustom himself to those things which cause the body to heal and mend.” That is to say, that healthy eating is not a goal unto itself, but rather an extension of a need to be in shape to serve God. Humans have to see themselves as God’s servants, and to be a good servant means to be responsive to do the wishes of the master, for a healthy person can serve God better than a ill one. There is a clear divide between this criterion for healthy living and that of modern society who consider health as an end to itself, a means to enjoy life, and a requisite for extending useful life and aging.

According to the guidelines of *Mishneh Torah*, one must distance oneself from things that damage the body, always taking into consideration the circumstances

and the amounts in which they are consumed and partaken: a small amount of a substance can be beneficial, whilst a large amounts of the same substance can be detrimental to the body. Moreover, one should accustom oneself to things that mend and heal the body, which does not mean that one must stick to health food products only, but rather to accustom oneself to things that have been shown to give the body the ability to mend and heal itself.

¶ In Christianity, the lack of any food rules is often a mark of distinction. Since the time of Augustine (AD 354-430) food rules have been regarded as pertaining to other religions or faiths and, as such, not to be abiding for Christians as Christ freed his followers from observing dietary rules. This notwithstanding, the principles of the perfection of God’s creation and the fallibility of humankind provide a sound framework of reference in which is usually recognized that the best food is also the least altered from its original form. In practical terms, to maintain health is best to accept God’s gifts in their most natural form.

¶ From the Islamic perspective, after belief, health is considered one of the greatest blessings of God, as a *hadith* puts it: “Ask God for forgiveness and health, for after being granted certainty, one is given nothing better than health.” A variety of verses and texts promote eating healthy wholesome food in moderation. In the Qu’ran: “Eat of the good things which We have provided for you.” (2:173); “Eat of what is lawful and wholesome on the earth.” (2:168), while a healthy nutritious diet must also be balanced to maintain the balance that God has established in all things: “And He enforced the balance. That you exceed not the bounds; but observe the balance strictly; and fall not short thereof.” (55:7-9); “Eat and drink, but avoid excess.” (20:81).

Regarding the *Ramadan* fast it’s important to observe that this practise does not undermine the believer’s health, it’s rigorous, but not health threatening, it is not a crashing diet and is usually adequate in calorie intake and involves no malnutrition. Provided that the person is healthy to begin with and the pre-early morning meal (*subhur*), traditionally including porridge, bread or fruit is taken, there’s little chance that fast can harm. After sunset, the daily fast is slowly broken with a simple snack-like bread, cheese or fruit, especially dates. Moderate and responsible eating and drinking are encouraged, and a whole tradition of special foods for the pre-fast and break-fast has developed. After the evening prayers (*isha’a*), follows the large evening *iftar* that often includes a hearty stew or spiced vegetable dish.

The daytime fast, coupled with the nighttime feast, enforces the truth that food and drink are a gift, not a given. Fasting puts the faithful in touch with his/her own body, which, when healthy, may be taken for granted. As many

processed foods contain chemicals that over-time can be stored in the body as toxins within cells, fasting can assist to purge these toxins while also allowing the digestive system to rest. Research has indicated that fasting can lower blood sugar levels and cholesterol, suggesting it may be advisable for moderate, stable, non-insulin diabetes, obesity and essential hypertension.

G O D ' S P H A R M A C Y

22

The Talmud and the *Midrash*, as well as all esoteric branches of Christianity and Islam, note that certain fruits and vegetables look like parts of the human body and, in virtue of the homeomorphic postulate, their consumption may affect the corresponding bodily organs, possessing thus a medicinal attribute.

For example, a sliced carrot looks like the human eye pupil, iris and radiating lines and, as carrots are a rich source of vitamin A, they greatly enhance the blood flow to the eyes and their function. A tomato has four chambers and is red; the heart is red and has four chambers, so the lycopen of tomatoes is conducive to a healthy heart and blood system. Grapes hang in a cluster that has the shape of the heart; they play a role in cardiovascular and blood vitality. A walnut looks like a miniature brain, with left and right hemispheres, upper cerebrums and lower cerebellums, and even the crevices on the nut resemble the neo-cortex of the brain, thus walnuts help develop neuron-transmitters for healthy brain function. Kidney beans look like the human kidneys and help to maintain healthy kidney functioning. Sweet potatoes look like the pancreas and actually balance the glycemic index of diabetics. Olives assist the health and function of the ovaries. Grapefruit, oranges, and other citrus fruits look like the mammary glands and actually assist the health of the breasts and the movement of lymph in and out of the breasts. Onions look like body cells, research shows that onions help clear waste materials from all of the body cells; and they produce tears that wash the epithelial layers of the eye. Celery and rhubarb look like bones and enhance bone strength – bones are 23% sodium and these foods are 23% sodium, if there isn't enough sodium in a diet the body pulls it from the bones, making them weak – these foods replenish skeletal needs. Avocados and pears look like the womb and cervix of the female and enhance their function, eating an avocado a week balance hormones, sheds unwanted birth weight and prevents cervical cancers. Figs are full of seeds and hang in twos when they grow, so they may increase the motility and count of male sperm and help overcome male sterility.

C O N C L U S I O N

The three Abrahamic faiths have a lot in common regarding food and dietary practices. Both Judaism and Islam have strict rules on what can and cannot be eaten. They share the avoidance of blood in food and pork, because it is believed blood has a damaging effect on the body. In Christianity, the New Testament has overwritten limitations on food, although followers must show their devotion to the faith by fasting. The rituals of fasting and the preparation of specific foods, whether intended to commemorate a special occasion or to celebrate everyday life, play a significant role in the three faiths. Specific markets have developed to allow Jewish people and Muslims to practice their dietary requirements in countries where they are a minority. The Torah and Qur'an prescribe animal sacrifices in the name of God and set up moral rules to avoid cruelty.

23

Christianity has abolished the idea of sacrificing animals altogether, as it is believed the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross reconciled God and humanity.

Food forms an integral part of the daily lives of the followers of the Abrahamic faiths, especially during holy days, as it symbolises religious identity. †

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GLOSSARY

Related to Jewish [J] and Muslim [M] culture.

28

'Eid al-Adba [M] Festival of Sacrifice (Abraham's Sacrifice Day), or Greater *Eid*, is an important religious holiday that follows the annual pilgrimage (*Hajj*, see).

'Eid al-Fitr [M] Three-day holiday that marks the end of *Ramadan* (see).

Akeret HaBayit [J] Lit. the "mainstay" of the home. § The woman of the house, the foundation of the home. *Akeret* is the feminine of *ikar* (see).

Basmalab [M] The collective name of the whole of the recurring Islamic prayer-formula *Bi'sm Allah ar-Rahman ar-rahim* (In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate) that constitutes the first verse of the 113 chapters (*suras*, see) of the Qur'an.

Birkat HaMazon [J] The Blessing on Nourishment, the Grace After Meals.

Bo-rei N'fa-shot [J] Lit. "Creator of Souls". § Blessing before meals.

Borek [J] Meat rolled in dough. A family of baked or fried filled pastries made of thin flaky dough known as *yufka*, or *phyllo*.

B'racha Acharonab [J] Blessing After meal.

B'racha Mei-ein Sha-losh [J] Threefold Blessing for foods associated with the Land of Israel.

29

Challah [J] Special bread prepared for the *Shabbat* (see).

Cholent [J] Dish made of potatoes and vegetables (Ashkenazi)

Dergab [M]. Lit. "A place of the threshold". § A sufi centre.

Fajr [M] First prayer of the day.

Gemarrab [J] Commentaries of the Babylonian Talmud.

Gullac [M] Rose-scented pastry boiled in milk.

Ha-adamah [J] Blessing before the meal for vegetables, fruits that grow from the ground, cultivated herbs, beans, corn, strawberries, raspberries, pineapples, bananas, melons, whole rice and millet, peanuts, sunflower seeds, rose hips, etc.

Hadiith [M] Lit. "narrative". § A collection of narrations concerning the words and deeds of the prophet Muhammad.

Ha-eitz [J] Blessing before the meal for fruits that grow on trees, nuts, dates, grapes, raisins, figs, cherries, pomegranates, olives, olive oil, etc.

Hagafen [J] Blessing before the meal for grape wine & grape juice.

Haggadab of Pesab [J] Texts that sets out the order of the ritual of Passover.

Hajj [M] The annual pilgrimage to Mecca, it occurs from the 8th to 12th

day of *Dhu al-Hijjah*, the 12th and last month of the Islamic calendar.

Halakha [J] The collective body of law, including biblical law (*Mitzva*, *Mitzvot*, see) and later talmudic and rabbinic law, as well as customs and traditions.

Halal [M] Lawful.

Hamdalab [M] (*Alhamdulillah*). All praise belongs to God.

Hamin [J] Dish made of potatoes and vegetables (Sephardic and Yemenite Jews).

Haraam [M] Unlawful.

Haroset [J] A mixture of apples, cinnamon, nuts and raisins.

Hekhsber [J] Labelled mark which insure *kosher* (see) standards.

Hidirellez [M] Turkish springtime festival.

Iftar [M] Fast-breaking meal.

Ikar [J] The central aspect, or the essence of something.

Isha'a [M] Evening prayer.

Jihaz [M] Trousseau.

Kasbrut [J] Dietary law.

Kiddush [J] Ceremonial prayer.

Kosher [J] Fit.

Laylat al-Qadr [M] Night of Power. one of the odd-numbered days in the last ten of the month of Ramadan.

Maghrib [M] Lit. "East". § Sunset prayer.

Maror [J] The bitter herbs which symbolize the bitterness of slavery.

Matzah [J] Unleavened flat baked wafers made solely from flour and water.

Mawlid an-Nab [M] The Prophet's Birthday.

Mayim acharonim [J] Last waters.

Mayim risbonim [J] First waters.

Mezzonot [J] Blessing before the meal for cereals, cakes, cookies, crackers, pie, pastry.

Midrash [J] Lit. "to investigate" or "study".
§ A homiletic method of biblical exegesis. The term also refers to the whole compilation of homiletic teachings on the Bible. It is a way of interpreting biblical stories beyond simple distillation of religious, legal or moral teachings.

Mishneh Torah [J] Lit. "Repetition of the Torah". § Subtitled *Sefer Yad ha-Hazaka*, "Book of the Strong Hand," is the code of religious law (*Halakha*, see) authored by Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, also known as Rambam), one of history's foremost rabbis.

Mitzva (pl. *mitzvot*) [J] Lit. "commandment". § It refers to the 613 commandments given in the Torah (see) and the seven rabbinic commandments instituted later for a total of 620. According to the teachings of Judaism, all moral laws are, or are derived from, divine commandments.

Motzi [J] Ritual blessing before food consumption.

Noruz [M] Iranian vernal equinox.

Ntillat yadayim [J] Washing of hands.

Pastirma [M] Eggs with cured meat.

Pesab Seder [J] Passover dinner.

Pesab [J] Passover.

Pilaf [M] Vegetables rolled in dough.

Purim [J] Festival to commemorate the deliverance of the Jewish people.

Qur'an [M] Lit. "a recitation". § The central religious text of Islam, which Muslims consider the verbatim word

of God and the Final Testament, following the Old and New Testaments. The Qur'an is divided into 113 *suras* (see) of unequal length classified either as Meccan or Medinan depending upon their place and time of revelation.

Ramadan [M] The the ninth month of the Islamic calendar which lasts 29 or 30 days. It is the month of fasting.

Salah [M] The five daily prayers *Fajr*, *Dhuhr*, *Asr*, *Maghrib* and *Isha'a*.

Sawm [M] Fasting.

Sefer Torah [J] Lit. "book of Torah" or "Torah scroll". § The copy of the Torah written on parchment in a formal, traditional manner by a specially trained scribe under strict requirements.

Shabbat [J] The seventh day of the creation of the world on which God rested.

Shabada [M] The profession of faith.

Shechita [J] Specific rules in the ritual slaughtering.

Shehakol [J] Blessing before the meal for meat, fish, eggs, dairy, water, mushrooms, juices, coffee, tea, beer, other

beverages, inferior uncultivated produce, spoiled produce, wild herbs, etc.

Shochet [J] Ritual slaughterer.

Shollehzard or **kbeer** [M] Indonesian yellow rice pudding.

Sura [M] Each of the 113 chapter of the Qur'an.

Tannur [M] Clay oven.

Tariqa [M] Spiritual orders.

Tasawwuf [M] Sufism.

Tisha B'Av [J] Fasting day.

Torah [J] Lit. "instruction". § The Five Books of Moses (*Beresbit*, Genesis; *Shmot*, Exodus; *Vayikra*, Leviticus; *Bamidbar*, Numbers; and *Dvarim* Deuteronomy. The entirety of Judaism's founding legal and ethical religious texts.

Treif [J] Unfit.

Wudu [M] Partial ablution before some rituals and prayers.

Yabrzeit [J] Teacher.

Yom Kippur [J] Day of Atonement.

Zakât [M] Giving of alms.



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