**Jewish table manners**

*“A person’s table atones for his sins”*

*—****Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Elazar***

By Dr. Erica Brown/JNS.org

**After fasting, the Jewish calendar quickly turns to feasting. And in true Jewish math, the ratio is one day of fasting for eight days of feasting (seven in Israel).**

**Sukkot is our remarkable harvest holiday where we celebrate the partnership of God and human beings in the production of food by blessing the four species and mark our economic and spiritual fragility by sitting in the Sukkah. These were heady days in the ancient world, and we call them in our prayers the holiday of our happiness; the harvest was a time of team effort, joy and relief. To ensure that these days were not a Dionysian binge, the Bible mandated that we take the best of nature and offer it up to God in our prayers of gratitude.**

**But wait—there’s more. We were also mandated to share the harvest and make sure that during the sacrifices of our pilgrimage days we included everyone in our household: the priests, the orphans, the converts and the poor. They may have been peripheral to our celebration. The Torah makes them central. Think of both those who lead you and those who need you, and the holiday will really be a time of joy.**

**In the Talmud, in pages we recently encountered in the daily Talmud cycle of learning, we find another aspect of table love. Rabbi Judah said that there are three behaviors that prolong one’s life: extending one's prayers, extending one's meal at the table and prolonging one’s time in the bathroom. This strange combination is actually not so strange. The statement moves from our deepest spiritual longings, to our social capital to our bodily needs. From the meta-physical to the physical, there is much we can do to make every day richer and more bountiful.**

**As the Talmud expounds on Rabbi Judah’s statement, the reason for the prolonged mealtime is offered. If we stay at the table long enough, perhaps a poor person will come by who can benefit immediately from our food rather than have to wait for our generosity. If the food is sitting right in front of us, charity is easy. We have to make giving as easy as possible so that generosity flows with little effort.**

**The Talmud then quotes a verse from Ezekiel (41:22) where both the altar in the Temple and the table are mentioned. The altar’s measurements are offered and then the verse concludes with the table that was also placed in the Temple precincts: “This is the table that is before the Lord.” Two sages believed that this verse spoke to both a pre-Temple *and* a post-Temple life. “As long as the Temple stood, the altar atoned for Israel’s sins. Now that it is destroyed, a person’s table atones for his sins.”**

**When we get past the wordplay to the content, perhaps these Sages were telling us something profound about life after the Temple’s destruction. Pilgrimage holidays brought our community together in the days of old. Reuniting with family and acquaintances, encountering strangers who became friends and coming together in shared purpose was a way of uniting us and creating solidarity. In the absence of the Temple, it is up to each of us to bring community together through the gift of a shared meal.**

**But how can a meal atone for sins? Our generosity can atone for past stinginess. When the table becomes a place of giving rather than mere social dining, then we have at least atoned for some of our interpersonal sins. Sukkot is the perfect time, coming straight after Yom Kippur, for our tables to atone: it’s time to invite that new family who we neglected last year, to invite back friends where a relationship had weakened, to invite people as a gesture of thanks for kindnesses unpaid. On Sukkkot we have the custom of filling our tables with guests. This year, make your table a place of atonement by making a special effort to be welcoming: “...and you should rejoice on your holidays.”**

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