

Down-to-Earth Judaism: Food, Sex, and Money

Arthur Waskow

For most liberal and progressive American Jews, Judaism has little to do with the warp and woof of everyday life—little to do with what food we eat, to whom and how we make love, where we spend or invest our money.

We may avoid eating some foods—but the foods we avoid are as likely to be non-union grapes, Chilean apples, or fast-food hamburgers from the slashed rain forests of the Amazon—as they are to be lobster or ham. We make ethical decisions about what to eat, but few of us consult Jewish sources for ethical advice.

We may be finicky about how to have sex—but that will probably have to do with condoms, herpes, and AIDS—not with avoiding the menstrual period as the Torah decrees. And few of us will consult Jewish sources for counsel on sex, or on health.

We may be choosing “socially responsible” money market funds—but we are not likely to connect that choice with the Torah’s command to let the poor glean from the corners of the field or to redistribute all land equally in the Jubilee year.

Many of us might say that our social concerns are ultimately rooted in our sense that Judaism cares about the poor and the oppressed. We may even connect our social values with our Jewishness by marching for the freedom of Soviet Jews . . . by working to restore black-Jewish dialogue . . . by voting for our synagogue to become a sanctuary for Salvadoran refugees . . . by sending money to the New Israel Fund for a battered women’s shelter in Tel Aviv . . . by taking part in a Shalom Seder-in-the-Desert at the Nevada nuclear testing site. But even then, these will seem like Jewish acts to take precisely in the times we have set aside for “being Jewish”—the time we reserve for “politics” or “religion.” And they will have to do with “policy” and the “big world”—what presidents and congresses do, not with the small and intimate details of our everyday lives. In the “small world” of our own lives—really the great bulk of our time—most of us live not as Jews but as Americans, or lawyers, or women. The time in which we work, spend money, eat, sleep—most of our lifetime, in fact—has little that is especially related to

being Jewish. That we save for a wedding, a funeral, a holy day, perhaps a Shabbat.

It is true that in the last twenty years, some liberal and progressive American Jews have taken the first steps to experiment with walking a more holistic Jewish life-path. But only a few, and only the first few steps. Precisely as liberals and progressives, but rarely as Jews, we have said that “politics” and “culture” and “religion” are not in fact isolated parts of our lives, but the fabric of our whole lives; that what we do about sex, money, and food is indeed more fully and really our “politics,” our “religion,” and our “culture” than what we do in those isolated moments when we deal with “policy.”

I want to propose that we now explore in our imaginations what it would mean to extend this wisdom in a Jewish context, to take the next step in Jewish renewal, the next step on a more holistic Jewish life-path.

Let us begin by saying out loud that, for many of us, this exercise may call up nightmares and demons. Demons perhaps from earlier generations of our families—making distinctions concerning kosher food that to us seemed insanely obsessive or disgustingly hypocritical. Nightmares, perhaps, of what it cost us or our parents to break free from the conventional Jewish roles set aside for women, the whispered Jewish taboo on menstruation; to break free from the conventional Jewish horror and contempt for homosexuals; to break free from the habit that the little blue pushke for the Jewish National Fund was the *only* way of showing that we cared for others who were trying to make a better world.

Perhaps more basic is the nightmare of Jewish claustrophobia—our own grandparents’ (or great-grandparents’) ghetto—the nightmare that convinced us that even if we are willing to be Jews in the “special” time in which we read *Tikkun* or go to Seder, we are not willing to define our everyday lives in a way that cuts us off from American society and culture.

Perhaps most basic of all is the nightmare of being “commanded” by these commands, constricted by these restrictions—and sensing these commands as coming not from some ultimately benign and wise Reality, from the necessities of communal life and the discoveries of countless generations, but instead from our immediate forebears—parents and grandparents from a narrow world who were unhelpful guides to the world we

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sought to live in, unhelpful when they tried to guide us and infuriating when they tried to command us. So for many of us, the only “down-to-earth Judaism” we knew was restrictive, divisive, irrational, and oppressive.

For many of us, these nightmares and demons carry real weight. They do and should affect what we choose to make out of being Jewish in our own lives. Yet perhaps we have let them have too much weight—assuming that the rigid form we inherited was the only form in which down-to-earth Judaism could exist.

And perhaps the time has come for us to look at the experience and the experiments of those among us who for the past twenty years have been inventing new versions of a fuller Jewish life-path, to see what might be possible. We might do this for the sake of that hypothesis we more than half believe: that the personal *is* political, and religious, and cultural—and Jewish.

So let us nod to the nightmares and demons, set them aside for the moment, and undertake a thought-experiment in creating our own down-to-earth Judaism—despite them. And then let us come back to reexamine them after we have explored what our own down-to-earth Judaism might be like.

In each of three areas of life, we will look at three questions: how Jewish tradition might mesh with our contemporary concerns, how we might develop the tradition in new paths, and how we might actually initiate and organize those new paths—ground them in continuing reality.

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Let us first take up questions of food. It is not by accident that I propose to start here. Perhaps the way in which biblical Israel focused on food and taught all future generations of Jews to do the same was a distinctive element of Israelite thought.

According to “biblical Israel’s” understanding of itself, as expressed in the Bible, and according to some (not all) of those who have studied the ancient cultures of the land of Canaan, the very divergence between “Canaanites” and “Israelites” may have emerged in part from the divergence between two ways of addressing the Life-Force of the Universe. One path was through sexuality, which obviously transmitted and celebrated life through the generations. In this view, sacred sexual intercourse with sacred sexual priests and priestesses (what the Bible called *kadesha* and *kadesh*—from the root for “holy”) was, in ancient Canaan, a way of invoking and celebrating that ultimate Intercourse that gave rise to all life.

The other path was through the celebration of food. In this view, biblical Israel created a form of prayer and

celebration that rejected the path of temple sexuality and focused entirely on bringing the food that sprang from the land—goats and sheep, barley and wheat, olive oil and wine, even water—to the central place of worship. Some was set aside for God the Lifegiver, who was the real owner of all land; some for the landless priests; and some for the poor who had little to eat.

In this culture, even the first independent act of human history was described as an act of eating—not as an act of sexuality or parenting or murder. That act of eating from the Tree of Knowledge sprouted into the burden of endless toil that all human beings faced to wring food from the earth. And when the same culture joyfully welcomed Shabbat into the world—the first step of releasing that burden of endless toil—it was also in the context of food, the manna in the wilderness, that Shabbat came.

In this culture, even the first independent act of human history was described as an act of eating—not as an act of sexuality or parenting or murder.

So it is hardly surprising that this culture generated an elaborate system of kashrut. When the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of the Jewish community necessitated some new approach to hallowing food that did not depend upon the Temple sacrifices, the Talmud described each family’s dinner-table as a holy Altar, and kashrut was elaborated far beyond its biblical simplicity. Without a separate food-producing land to make them distinctive, the Jews made their Diaspora dinner-tables so distinctive that at every meal their separate peoplehood was reaffirmed.

The content of kashrut has puzzled many analysts. Some have claimed that the prohibition of certain meats protected health; others, that it was the compromise a deeply vegetarian ethic made reluctantly with inveterate eaters of meat. Some have argued that the method of ritual slaughter minimized the animals’ pain; others, that the separation of milk from meat was intended to strengthen an ethic of distinguishing death from life.

Perhaps the most interesting analysis—because it went to the heart of what the entire halakhic system was about—was the one that argued that the entire system of distinctions concerning food was an integral part of a culture that focused on distinctions.

In our own generation, the strongest defenses of kashrut are simply that it is what we have inherited from the Jewish past, and what therefore defined us as

Jews in everyday life. As even the far-flung ghettos and Jewish neighborhoods dissolved into an even more dispersed Diaspora, kashrut might be practically the only distinctive element in everyday Jewish life. From this standpoint, too, kashrut is about distinctions: distinguishing ourselves from others.

For many Jews in our generation, therefore, the question of kashrut is especially problematic. Most of us want to assert our Jewishness without letting it separate us from others with whom we share basic political, cultural, and spiritual values. Many of us act as if “we are what we eat” when it comes to decisions about vegetarianism, macrobiotic diets, boycotts of food grown by oppressed workers in Chile, South Africa, or the United States. Yet many of us also resist the imposition of absolute, black-and-white distinctions in our lives: this you must and this you must not.

Is there any way to reshape this ungainly bundle of our partly contradictory values so that it makes a coherent whole, affirming and strengthening our lives as Jews?

Most of our strongest social values have their roots (or at least their analogues) in values expressed by Jewish tradition:*

Oshék. The prohibition of oppressing workers—and a similar prohibition of exploiting customers. Its principles could be extended to prohibit eating the fruit of such oppression or exploitation.

Tza’ar ba’alei hayyim. Respect for animals. It could be extended to prohibit eating any meat, or to prohibit eating meat from animals that have been grown under super-productive “factory farm” conditions. It could also be extended to respect for the identity of plants—for example, by prohibiting the misuse of pesticides and of genetic recombination, or the eating of foods that were grown by such misuses.

Leshev ba’aretz. Living with, and not ruining, the earth. It could be extended to require the use of “natural” or “organic” foods—foods not grown with chemical pesticides.

Shemirat haguf. The protection of one’s own body. It could be understood to prohibit eating food that contains carcinogens and/or hormones, and quasi-food items like tobacco and overdoses of alcohol. This principle would also mandate attention to the problems of anorexia or overeating that cause us deep physical and psychological pain and make food into a weapon that we use against ourselves.

*For the remainder of this discussion of food and the possibility of an “ethical kashrut,” I have drawn a great deal on work that Rabbi Rebecca Albert, Dean of Students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and I have done together in the context of the Reconstructionist movement. This approach owes much of its origins to Reconstructionist ways of thinking, but also seems to “work” in other approaches to Judaism and Jewish peoplehood held by a wide range of Jews.

Tzedakah. The sharing of food with the poor. It could be extended to prohibit the eating of any meal, or any communal festive meal, unless a proportion of its cost goes to buying food for the hungry.† An extended version of this approach suggests that, in a world where protein is already distributed inequitably, it is unjust to channel large amounts of cheap grain into feeding animals to grow expensive meat protein—and that it is therefore unjust to eat meat at all.

Rodef tzedek and Rodef shalom. The obligation to pursue peace and justice. It might be understood to require the avoidance of food produced by companies that egregiously violate these values—for example, by investing in South Africa or by manufacturing first-strike nuclear weapons.

Berakhah and Kedushah. The traditional sense that eating consciously must affirm a sense of holiness and blessing. This might be understood to require that at the table we use old or new forms for heightening the attention we give to the unity from which all food comes—whether we call it God or not. This would help us maintain an awareness of the sad fact that we must kill plants and/or animals to live.

It is important to note here that we have given only the barest sketch of these ethical principles that are embedded in Jewish tradition—no more, in fact, than a list. To draw on them in any serious way would mean to look more deeply at how the tradition shapes their content—not only at the specific rulings, but at how one arrives at them. Not necessarily to follow the same paths of thought or decision, but to wrestle with a Judaism that draws on the wisdom of all the Jewish generations—not our own alone. Once we have done this, then indeed our generation must decide for itself.

The very decision to apply these ethical principles to the choice of what to eat would represent this process of consulting the tradition without being imprisoned by it. If we undertook such a study, we would first find that every one of these principles stands as an ethical norm in Jewish tradition—not only in the aggadic sense of symbol, metaphor, and philosophy, but also in the law code: halakha. Then we would find that there are hints in the tradition that one is obligated not only to avoid doing these misdeeds, but also to avoid benefiting from them if they have been done by others. But we would also find that there is no clear legal requirement to bring together the Jewish sense of the importance of food with these principles by forbidding the eating of the fruits of these misdeeds. We would also find that

†In line with the recent establishment of Mazon, a Jewish anti-hunger organization that collects a voluntary self-tax on communal celebration meals.

there is little in the tradition that would stand in the way of adding new ethical restrictions to what we allow ourselves to eat.

Does it make sense for us now to draw on these basic principles to set new standards for what we actually eat—standards for an “ethical kashrut”? If we did, do we run the danger of obsessiveness, or even the danger that applying strict standards might result in drastically reducing the kinds of foods we could eat at all? Perhaps we can learn a lesson from the way different types of Jews practice traditional kashrut today.

Different Jews do maintain different answers to the question, “Is this food kosher?” For example, some will accept only certain types of certification on packaged goods, while others are satisfied with reading labels to verify ingredients as kosher. Some people will drink only kosher wine, while others believe this category is no longer relevant. Some keep “biblical kashrut,” only abstaining from biblically forbidden foods. Some are willing to eat nonkosher foods in restaurants and in other people’s homes, while others do not eat any cooked foods away from home.

Could we call into being a broader commission for eco-kashrut that could reach out far beyond the Jewish community to define what products are so damaging to the earth that they ought not be bought or consumed?

A new kashrut that is rooted in ethical strands of Torah will also demand that people make choices about how to observe. For example, some will treat the principle of *oshek* (not oppressing workers) as paramount, and will choose only to eat foods that are grown without any oppression of food workers (from one’s own backyard or neighborhood garden, or from a kibbutz where all workers are also owners and participants). Others may make the principle of *leshev ba’aretz* (protection of the environment) paramount, and put *oshek* in a secondary place—perhaps applying it only when specifically asked to do so by workers who are protesting their plights.

But there will also be some important differences in the way choices will work in an ethical kashrut from the way choices work in traditional kashrut. According to the new approach, there will be so many ethical values to weigh that it may be rare to face a black-and-white choice with a particular food. This one is grown

by union workers, that one with special care for the earth and water, another. . . . So choices will depend more on a balancing and synthesizing of the underlying values than on an absolute sense of Good and Bad. More on a sense of Both/And than of Either/Or.

What impact might adherence to this new approach to “ethical kashrut” have upon adherence to the traditional code of kosher food? Jews who find traditional kashrut an important link with Torah and Jewish peoplehood could continue to observe it while observing ethical kashrut as well; Jews who cannot relate to the traditional code could continue to leave it to one side while following the new path with its new way of connecting with Torah and Jewish peoplehood.

Some who are newly observant of ethical kashrut may find that it leads them to find unexpected value in the traditional form. Others who have observed kashrut in traditional ways may find that the new one fulfills their Jewish sense more richly, and give up the ancient form.

In any case, this new approach to kashrut would be trying to deal with the issue of “distinctions” in a new way: not by separating only, but by consciously connecting. Connecting what is uniquely Jewish with what is shared and universal. Connecting Jewish categories with universal concerns. Consciously asserting Jewish reasons to avoid a food that others are also avoiding for similar but not identical reasons. Choosing not Either/Or but Both/And.

If we were to draw further on the analogy with traditional kashrut, what we would need is a kind of “living Talmud”—a group of people who are Jewishly knowledgeable, ethically sensitive, and willing to become reasonably expert on questions regarding food so that their advice would be taken seriously by large parts of the Jewish community. Such a commission on ethical kashrut might periodically issue reports and suggestions on specific matters and specific foods, listing specific foods and brands that it regarded as “highly recommended,” and others it thought should be “avoided if at all possible.”

How should such a commission come into being? We will take up this question after dealing with two other areas of “down-to-earth” Judaism.

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In the ancient world, food and sex were the two most powerful emblems of the Lifegiver in the visible world, and the production of food was the strongest link between human life and the rest of the created world. On the earth-to-human side, this link was governed by kashrut; on the human-to-earth side, it was governed by rules of land use, including provisions

for the poor and for periodic equalizations of land-holding, and by intense human prayers for rain. Indeed, the provision and protection of water is one of the main concerns of Jewish liturgy.

There were other links between earth and humanity, but none required as much care and regulation as did food. Clothing was one of these other links, and the Torah notes a kind of *kashrut* of clothes—not mixing linen and wool. But the rabbinic tradition did not greatly elaborate upon the rule. Breathing was another link. God’s most intimate name may have been based on a breathing sound, and breath/wind became the metaphor for life, soul, and spirit. Even in the biblical and rabbinic periods, air pollution was occasionally a problem—downwind of a tannery, for example—but this was rare, and few rules were developed for the correct use of air.

In our own world, food is no longer the only problematic link between human beings and their environment. Our water and air are often polluted, and although food represents the most crucial link to the earth, producing it takes up a much smaller proportion of our work than it did before the modern age. Today there are many products that we make from the world around us that are crucial to our lives and health. Does it make sense to apply to them some rules of “kashrut,” and if so how would we develop such rules? And how would we enforce them?

In this new society, the human-to-earth link comes not so much through the use of land as through the use of money. Rules about reserving the gleanings and the produce of the corners of a field for the poor, redistributing land once a generation, letting the land rest from its work every seventh year—all these need to be translated into the use of money and of “technological capital” if we are to preserve the same functional relationship of holiness between human beings and their environment.

In a sense, in our world the kashrut of food is holiness at retail; the kashrut of money would be holiness at wholesale.*

There are some religious and cultural traditions that view money itself, or the effort to amass it, as intrinsically evil. There are others that see the possession of money—or large amounts of it—as intrinsic evidence of holiness and blessedness. Most of Jewish thought sees money as a powerful tool for evil or for good—depending on how it is used. There is deep Jewish experience with the mitzvah of tzedakah—sharing the just and righteous use of money not only to alleviate poverty, but to help

*In much of the rest of this discussion about money, and in my comments about a “connective” rather than “separative” ethics, I have drawn on conversations with Jeffrey Dekro, Associate Director of the Shalom Center.

end it and create shared wealth—and with the use of money to protect Jewish rights, assist Jewish refugees, and help create the Jewish community in Israel. All this experience suggests that as the Jewish community stirs itself to protect its own survival and that of the planet, the wise use of money is an important tool. Knowing where *not* to spend money, as well as where it *should* be spent, is important both morally and politically.

Let us look at the different areas of possibility:

Work. How do we choose what companies to work for and what work to do? Should engineers, secretaries, scientists, public-relations experts, and nurses be asking whether their work contributes to or reduces the danger of a nuclear holocaust? Does Jewish tradition and the Jewish community offer any help in making such judgments? What help is most needed?

In the Summer 1984 issue of *Reform Judaism*, Rabbi Laurence K. Milder wondered what would happen “If the Scientists said No” to nuclear expansion. He described a Boston conference on “The Faith Community and the Defense Industry Employee,” in which engineers and scientists examined how their various religious and ethical systems might deal with work on nuclear questions. Said Milder:

Can Jews afford to be disinterested regarding nuclear weapons research? Until now, the Reform movement has been outspoken in its opposition to the arms race. Yet the question remains to be addressed whether the same religious convictions ought to prohibit one from working on the construction of those weapons whose deployment we oppose. Being disproportionately represented in the sciences and high-tech industries, we can be sure that the question would have far-reaching impact. A decision to refrain from such work would be a serious blow to the nuclear weapons’ industry. Any decision at all would be better than silence, which suggests that Judaism stops at the doors of one’s workplace. Congregations can provide a forum for this kind of dialogue, in which Jewish scientists and engineers can talk about their concerns, to one another, and to fellow Jews.

How could the Jewish community, or parts of it, decide whether specific jobs were “kosher?” Suppose a community decided a specific job was not kosher; should and could the community provide financial help—temporary grants, low-interest loans, etc.—to Jews who decide to leave such jobs for reasons of Torah and conscience? Should organizing toward such a fund be a goal of the Jewish community?

Investments. How do we judge where to invest money—in which money market funds, IRAs, etc? What about institutional funds in which we may have a voice or could make for ourselves a voice—college endowments,

pension funds, city bonds, etc? In the last ten years, there has arisen in the United States a network of people and groups concerned with “socially responsible investment”—that is, working out how to apply ethical standards to investment decisions. Demands for divestment of investments in businesses that operate in South Africa are one—but by no means the only—example of this approach. Labor relations, degree of involvement in the arms race, and health and safety concerns have been others. The network has now brought into being socially responsible “screened” investment funds, which avoid investing money in what each considers the most socially irresponsible firms, and affirmative socially responsible investment funds that seek to invest in new or small but financially viable businesses that in their eyes have major positive factors for social responsibility.

In the Jewish community, investment funds that might become “socially responsible” include community-worker and rabbinical association pension funds, synagogue endowments, building campaign accounts, pulpit flower funds, seminary endowments, etc. How would the community decide which investments are “kosher”?

Purchases. Should we as individuals, when we choose which companies to buy consumer goods from, use as one factor in our choice the facts of what else a specific company is producing? Are operations in South Africa, the USSR, Chile—or in making nuclear weapons, dangerous petrochemicals—relevant? Should we ask our synagogues, our pension funds, our city and state governments, our PTA’s, to choose vendors on the same basis? Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi has suggested that since in our era we consume many items other than food, the notion of kashrut should be expanded beyond food to many other products that we use. Is electric power generated by a nuclear plant “kosher,” he asks? And, even more to the point, could we call into being a broader commission for eco-kashrut that could reach out far beyond the Jewish community to define what products are so damaging to the earth that they ought not be bought or consumed?

Taxes. Is it legitimate to challenge, protest, or prevent the use of our tax money to carry on activities that profoundly contradict Torah? If so, how do we define “profoundly contradict”? What weight do we give to the fact that our taxes and government expenditures are defined by elected representatives?

Tzedakah. How do we decide how much money we should give to “charity” and to which enterprises to give it?

In the last twenty years, there have grown up among Jewish liberals and progressives not only new channels

for *tzedakah*, such as Mazon (intended to feed the hungry) and the Jewish Fund for Justice (intended to help groups of the poor or powerless organize to win their own footing in the world), but also a relatively new (and old) form for *tzedakah*—the “*tzedakah* collective.” These groups meet together, face to face, to discuss possible recipients of *tzedakah*; the participants agree in advance on what proportion of their incomes they will give, and on a more or less collective process for deciding how to give it. The ambience produced is very different from what happens when individuals write checks to a national *tzedakah* organization, whether it is the United Jewish Appeal or the Jewish Fund for Justice; and usually the involvement of the participants is much deeper in learning about *tzedakah* and the Jewish tradition’s teachings on *tzedakah*, as well as in learning about projects that might be *tzedakah* recipients.

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Participants in these *tzedakah* collectives report that their involvement feels inspiring and their field results seem good; yet the number of such collectives seems still to be much lower than the number of *havurot* for study and prayer. What would be ways of encouraging this process?

It would take two steps to encourage such direct involvement in *tzedakah*. One would be face-to-face organizing by rabbis, Jewish teachers, and similar local Jewish community workers to get groups of families to meet together to do *tzedakah*. The other would be providing such groups with information not only on *tzedakah* decisions that groups like them are making, but also on Jewish aspects of the everyday use of money in their non-*tzedakah* lives: the “*kashrut* of money” for investment, purchasing, tax, and workplace choices. If a packet of newsletters with such information were made available every month or two first to rabbis to pass on to “*tzedakah* activists” and then to *tzedakah* collectives as they appeared, the chances would be much greater that Jewish values would be consciously applied to the use of money in many aspects of life. □

The second section of Down-to Earth Judaism: Food, Sex, and Money will appear in the next issue of Tikkun. The second section will address questions of sexuality.