



No Extreme Dieting

According to the Book of Formation, the sense of the month of Shevat is the sense of eating (which includes drinking, as well). We might think that for servants of God, eating and drinking are simple necessities to be accomplished minimally. Surprisingly, the book of Ecclesiastes, which ends with the famous verse “Fear God and keep his commandments for that is the **entire person**” also writes that “The **entire person**, (is) that he should eat and drink and see good in all his labor.”¹ (This theme is repeated in many verses in Ecclesiastes).

The sages say that the eating in Ecclesiastes is Torah study and the drinking is good deeds. But we cannot ignore the simple meaning of the verse: Actual eating and drinking in the proper manner are important, and they are preparation for the mitzvahs of Torah study and good deeds. Eating strengthens the brain for Torah study and drinking (wine) opens and benefits the heart to perform good deeds replete with love of Israel. (“The drinking of wine is great, for it brings those who are far – near”).²

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:13.

² Sanhedrin 103b.

In a similar verse, “That he may eat and drink and show his soul good,”³ Rashi writes: “That he should take to his heart to do justice and charity with the food and drink, and this is what (Jeremiah) said to Yehoyakim (who was wicked) ‘Your father (the righteous king Yoshiyahu) ate and drank and did justice and charity then he had good.’”

Eating and drinking of the month of Shevat are connected to the royal characteristic of “The scepter (*shevet*, the same letters as Shevat) shall not be removed from Judah.”⁴ The good king performs his role, doing “justice and charity” (This parallels the private person’s Torah study and good deeds) by virtue of his eating and drinking, “and then he has good.” How?

According to one explanation, Jeremiah was rebuking Yehoyakim for being immersed in his lusts. This was unlike his father, who, together with his eating and drinking, oversaw his nation and did “justice and charity.”

According to a different, opposite explanation, the prophet was rebuking Yehoyakim, who, instead of rectifying his ways, would abstain to the extreme to atone for the evil that he had done. Jeremiah said to him that his righteous father conducted himself properly. He “ate and drank and did justice and charity.” The good king eats and drinks in a healthy and rectified manner (“the tzaddik eats to the satiation of his soul”⁵). This balanced eating gives him inspiration for his main concern - the welfare of

³ Ecclesiastes 2:24.

⁴ Genesis 49:10.

⁵ Proverbs 12:25.

the nation. The king is charged with ensuring that his people have food and drink. He must also strike the necessary balance between the justice and charity with which he should lead the nation.

Chassidut teaches that this is the basis for rectified conduct for the individual, as well. We must not fight against our body (which is the “donkey (*chamor*) of your enemy”⁶, the materiality (*chomer*, cognate to *chamor*) that hates the soul). Instead, we must fulfill the end of the verse about the donkey and “release it.” We must eat and drink in the proper manner for the sake of our physical health and the joy and expansion of our souls – without extreme abstention or extreme indulgence. These extremes consume the body and pain the soul. When a person is settled in his mind and joyous, he can discern what he really needs to rectify and do charity with others with a good, benevolent eye.

On the basis of eating and drinking in health and joy, we merit their inner intention – clarification of the holy sparks within the food and drink.

On the public level, when the platform of the king of Israel is based on concern for the proper eating and drinking of his nation and continues from there to the rectification of the state with justice and charity, the Nation of Israel will reach its destiny: eating/drawing near of all the non-Jewish sparks. “For My home shall be called (*yikaray*, same

⁶ Exodus 23:5.

numerical value as Shevat) a house of prayer for all the nations.”⁷

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⁷ Isaiah 56:7.