

Eating Different Bread

Kol Nidrei 5779

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The week before I began serving as your Assistant Rabbi, I enrolled in a one-week intensive course to learn the foundational skills of musical improvisation. Before stepping into a career that was so bound up with the last decade of my life, and my identity, I decided to try something radically new and fun. I wanted to feel free to fail, and brave to try. In Jewish tradition we call this *torab l'sbma*, study for its own sake. Musical improv was an opportunity to learn and grow and feel challenged without the high stakes of my calling.

I was overwhelmed by the impact of my week in improv-land. The experience revealed so many doors and pathways in my brain that I found myself stumped to describe how it had changed me. I only discovered the words I'd been seeking, by chance, when a congregant emailed me a piece by the poet Elizabeth Alexander, describing her niece's Eritrean Orthodox Christian and American Orthodox Jewish wedding. Dr. Alexander reflects on the blessings of watching centuries of tradition braid themselves together: "Critical thinking develops when you go outside of your comfort zone, when you eat a different bread from the one you grew up with. Challah, chapati, hot-water cornbread, pita, injera, baguette—how wonderful to eat a different bread, a differently spiced meal."¹

Eating different bread—the perfect metaphor for the ways we break out of our most deeply entrenched routines. What could be more elemental to the way we live than bread? When Dr. Alexander lists challah and pita, injera and baguette, we don't just imagine food, but the cultures, religions, countries and histories kneaded into their dough. Challah evokes Shabbat candles, *kippot*, the face of my Great-Grandmother, and the *motzi* blessing. Don't baguettes come wrapped in French flags with *liberté, égalité, and fraternité* baked into their crusts? While spongy injera is more than a food, but also a serving platter and a utensil that conjures the rich traditions of the Horn of Africa like sharing meals around a low table.

Eating different bread means relinquishing the comforts of the familiar for the possibilities of what's foreign. Musical improv was a different bread that nurtured me in ways I did not even know I was hungry. But while Dr. Alexander equipped me with a powerful metaphor, she also challenged me: beyond *torab l'sbma* and the realm of effortless experimentation, where else in our lives should we be eating different bread? Which reflexive behaviors should we re-examine? Where can the automatic benefit from variation?

At this hour of Kol Nidre, after we have recited the confessional litany of our sins, we turn our hearts toward the question of spiritual and behavioral improvement: how will we be better to one

¹ Elizabeth Alexander, "How to Make a Life from Scratch," *The New York Times*, 21 Jul 2018 [accessed 1 Aug 2018] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/21/opinion/sunday/how-to-make-a-life-from-scratch.html>.

another, and how will we better embody and honor the spark of Divinity in each of us? These questions lie at the heart of *teshuva*, but I'm beginning to believe that "doing better" might not be the only avenue toward growth. What possibilities might we discover to repair relationships, to avoid chronic missteps, to more effectively communicate, and to absorb new ideas, if we flip the scripts we've memorized? Please pardon the metaphor if you're already fasting, but how might we eat different bread in 5779?

In reflecting on my conversations with congregants and family members, as well as the inveterate "*teshuva* points" in my own life, I believe there are three areas where eating different bread can result in meaningful change: what we read, how we give, and how we speak.

As our political environment reaches record antagonism, sociologists and political scientists are blaming algorithms that shape the contours of our information universe and constrict our ideological bubbles. We have all logged onto news feeds that amplify our views or listened to a podcast that exposes corruption in the party we pillory. And most of the time, I disconnect from my devices feeling a greater sense of confusion and aggravation.

The way we consume news, like the way we eat, is habitual. We wake up in the morning, turn on the coffee maker and put our bread in the toaster, before we're even conscious of being upright. And as we walked from our beds to the kitchen counter, we were probably on our phones. How can we eat different bread where or national conversation is concerned?

I have read that one way to try and bridge our ideological differences is to read the news from different perspectives. Comedian John Oliver insists that a "healthy media diet" has to be broader than our own viewpoints.² I agree with Mr. Oliver, but I would go much further. We must move beyond news media to drama and memoir, fairy tales and poetry, history and Torah. News has colonized so much of our digital terrain with a sense of ceaseless urgency, that it's increasingly hard to explore literature. Author Joyce Carole Oates makes the best case for moving beyond the news: "Reading [books] is the sole means by which we slip, involuntarily, often helplessly, into another's skin, another's voice, another's soul."³

Turning off the news altogether and moving to literature—whether on your Kindle or an old-fashioned paperback—bolsters empathy. In a political climate defined increasingly by the disparagement of those who disagree with us, we must seize opportunities to slip helplessly into other voices and souls, to allow their fears and hopes to become our own. When we see the world from different vantage points, we humanize the other; we taste their bread. Spending time in other skins, by broadening our diet beyond media, may lead us to better appreciate and honor the complexity of those who think and vote differently.

² Jason Wilson, "So you want to get out of your bubble: try reading these conservative websites," *The Guardian US Edition*, 22 Nov 2016 [accessed 15 Sept 2018] <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/nov/22/conservative-websites-media-bubble>.

³ Karen Swallow Prior, "How Reading Makes Us More Human," *The Atlantic*, 21 June 2013 [accessed 15 Sept 2018] <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/how-reading-makes-us-more-human/277079/>.

Beyond ameliorating conflict, eating different bread can nurture our spiritual growth. At this time of year, many of us open our check books or our schedules to *tzedakah*. We might contribute financially to our favorite non-profits or sign up for a night at the CRS shelter. The High Holy Days are definitely “working” if part of our observance involves the care of others. But eating different bread means changing the way we give to experience different dimensions of *tzedakah*. We often conflate the word *tzedakah* with “charity,” but this is a limiting translation. *Tzedakah* is an act of justice, and we become stronger advocates for a fair and just world when we give in variegated ways.

Elizabeth Alexander writes that critical thinking develops when we go outside of our comfort zone, when we eat a different bread from the one we grew up with.” What are ways that we can leave our comfort zone where *tzedakah* is concerned? I have more than a few ideas. Here’s one:

For years, I volunteered at a soup kitchen downtown. I did every job on the menu: coat check, cooking, serving food, clothing closet, clean-up. I played every part except the one where I sat down with the guests and got to know them. I was nervous that I wouldn’t know what to say, or that I would mess up and ask a question that stirred pain. One evening, Anthony approached me with a poem he had written about my smile. I realized instantly that my fear was misplaced; our guests were artists and teachers, parents and friends, who were eager for connection and had no special requirements. I felt ashamed of my nerves and grateful for Anthony’s boldness. He taught me that more than the work of my hands, it was the spirit of warmth and concern that nurtured him most in our dining room. He fed me a new bread and taught me that I, too, could receive *tzedakah*—from the very people I was serving.

Perhaps the most challenging place to try different bread is in the way we communicate. When it comes to our families and colleagues, and even God, we easily fall into speech patterns that can adversely affect those in relationship to us. Jacob returns home from a stressful test. Greeting his son at the door, Jake’s Dad asks, “So how did you do?” Dad wants to show he’s aware of Jake’s anxiety, and rooting for his success, but he conveys instead that he cares more about Jake’s performance than his feelings. Sally finds a note on her desk, “You missed our deadline.” Her colleague intends to explain why their project isn’t ready, but instead she reinforces a pattern of making Sally feel like everything is her fault. Jane takes a semester off college after a year of challenging mental health struggles. Her friends tease her for partying too hard. Joe loses his wife to cancer and stops attending Shabbat services. If his *Mi Shebeirach* prayers did not work, how can he possibly believe God is listening?

In our most familiar relationships we easily fall into fixed scripts. Sometimes we rely too much on superficial pleasantries, never probing into the wellbeing of those we love. “Did you ace your test?” In equal measure, we are so eager to know what’s what, to solve problems, or to explain ourselves, that we simplify what’s complex—placing blame or making erroneous assumptions. “Jane isn’t depressed; she just had too much fun.” “It’s not my fault the presentation is incomplete. Sally wasn’t ready.” And when it comes to God, we too easily stop communicating at the moments when we need a Listener and a Witness, a Protector and a Hope.

The Mishna, Jewish tradition’s earliest legal compilation, asserts that Yom Kippur atones for transgressions between a person and God, but for transgressions between a woman and her neighbor, Yom Kippur cannot atone until she has apologized and requested forgiveness.⁴ At the heart of the Mishna’s contention is the idea that we must explicitly claim the words and ways we have done harm, acknowledging our own role in the suffering of others. To eat a different bread, we must acknowledge the words spoken in fury and frustration, and those expressed with thoughtlessness and insensitivity. Unlearning the scripts that we have memorized will enable us to more nimbly respond to the feelings of those who rely on us for partnership and support.

And when we feel abandoned by those we love or work with, or even by God, we must not stop communicating, but just the opposite—we must resolve to speak louder and more insistently about our needs.

A recent article in *The New York Times* asked, “Is the Algorithmification of the Human Experience a Good Thing?”⁵ The journalists were highlighting the uncertain implications of social media algorithms that drive users toward content that extends their time on platforms like Facebook or Youtube. One obvious risk is that people are drawn to extremes as algorithms generate material that accentuates their feelings and beliefs. It is tempting to blame our problems on devices and engineers, but we all follow our own imperfect algorithms. We re-enact behaviors that cause pain and we reinforce flawed ideas. And we can change.

The *Unetane Tokef* reminds us that we can meet our challenges with *teshuvah*—changing our scripts with each other and God, *tefila*—broadening our thinking and bolstering empathy, and *tzedakah*—giving generously of ourselves and receiving the blessings of others. If we’ve spent our lives breaking the fast with challah or pita, bagels or baguettes, let’s try a different bread. A willingness to experiment with our deeply ingrained habits and traditions, may just reveal new dimensions of wholeness and fulfillment.

⁴ Mishna Yoma 8:9

⁵ Max Fisher & Amanda Taub, “Is the Algorithmification of the Human Experience a Good Thing?” *The New York Times*, 6 Sept 2018 [accessed 6 Sept 2018] https://static.nytimes.com/email-content/INT_5362.html?nlid=72304428.