

The epigram, “you are what you eat,” has been around in some form since 1826, when it first appeared in a French article, translated as “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.” So this saying is not anywhere near as old as Torah. I thought of it, nonetheless, as I attempted to explore a particularly bizarre passage in this week’s parashah, Mishpatim.

Mishpatim opens right after the revelation of the 10 commandments, as the people are still gathered at Mt. Sinai. It includes a fairly comprehensive list of the ordinances that make for a stable society, as if to remind us that thundering revelation is all very well, but we still need to know how to live effectively together.

And then the last Chapter of the parashah, Chapter 24 of Exodus, sees Hashem commanding Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and 70 elders of the House of Israel to ascend partway up Mt. Sinai. This often gets glossed over between all of the ethical ordinances, and Moshe’s ascent all the way up the mountain, where he remains for 40 days and 40 nights – coming down only a few parshiyot later when the people build the Golden Calf.

But this semi-exclusive revelation for the leaders and the elders is nonetheless there, and there is some deeply puzzling language. Listen closely, because I am going to ask for your reactions!

Chapter 24, verses 9-11 relate: “Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel: under the feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. Yet [Hashem] did not raise a hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank.”

First of all, I will invite responses – what do you all make of this vision? What questions does it bring up?

So pretty much all of the commentators agree that nobody literally saw God, they just had a trance-like vision. But the final verse – “[Hashem] did not raise a hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank.” has two sort of distinct commentary traditions, one deriving a negative lesson, and one positive.

Two particular issues get discussed over and over again. The first is, did this go well, or poorly? Some commentators, such as Rashi, believe that the elders did something wrong, that the verse, “Hashem did not raise a hand against the Israelites,” indicates that they deserved some sort of punishment for the way that they were interacting with the divine, but that God let them slide this time. Other commentators, such as Sforno, think that verse indicates, rather, “G’d, did not extend a helping hand to enable these nobles and elders to grant them the level of prophetic status. . . the “visions” achieved by these elders were not further helped along by G’d.”

The second issue is, what the heck were they doing eating and drinking? And was that good or bad? Several commentators hold that the eating was real, was in fact, the kind of feast routinely used to seal covenants. Sforno writes that the eating indicates that the elders came through their experience with their sensory capacities intact, but he also says, “They prepared this festive meal congratulating themselves on a higher spiritual dimension which they felt they had achieved;” they were self-satisfied.

And yet other commentators say that the eating and drinking were a metaphorical nourishment. As Rashi offers, “They gazed at [Hashem] intimately as though their association with Him were a matter of eating and drinking;” they were arrogant.

So were the elders doing something wrong, or something praiseworthy, with their metaphorical or physical looking, eating and drinking? What I love about the question is that the potential answers are all instructive.

There are different kinds of seeing. There is seeing overcome by awe, in the moment, and seeing that is consumed with the thought, “wait until I tell so-and-so about what I saw.” There is the nourishment of being in the present moment, and the nourishment of self-satisfaction, of feeling like we’re better than other people.

And since So: “you are what you eat.” At its simplest, when we eat healthy food, we are healthy. But it’s also true that we become the messages that we feed ourselves, that the ways in which we seek nourishment dictate how we walk in the world. If we imagine that the elders fed themselves the self-satisfaction of knowing that they had received revelation and that made them better than the other Israelites, then they would indeed have, in their arrogance, missed the actual experience of the Divine, and been deserving of punishment.

That thought reminded me of some words that Martin Luther King Jr spoke in Montgomery on March 25th, 1965 at the end of his historic freedom march from Selma: “... the southern aristocracy took the world and gave the poor white man Jim Crow. He gave him Jim Crow. And when his wrinkled stomach cried out for the food that his empty pockets could not provide, he ate Jim Crow, a psychological

bird that told him that no matter how bad off he was, at least he was a white man, better than the black man. And he ate Jim Crow.”

Dr. King made the same point as one of the interpretations of this parashah: that arrogance can be a form of nourishment in place of food, albeit one that makes everyone less healthy.

But if we imagine that the revelation instead made the elders more fully human, more present, more aware of their humanity, then I think it's beautiful that they ate and drink literal food and beverage afterwards. They had their ecstatic experience, and landed with a greater awareness of reality around and within them. Fully present, they noticed and attended to the needs of their bodies. They knew that an ecstatic experience doesn't negate the realities of human experience, they held no lasting sense of themselves as transcendent beings. I hope that instead of trying to feed themselves illusions of grandeur, they fed themselves real bread.

The elders and the commentators on their actions warned us, millenia before Dr. King would make the point more explicitly, that we have to be careful what feeds us. We have to be careful what we choose to take in, and not just physically. Are we fed by knowledge of our own humanity, or by a sense of superiority over others? Do we feed ourselves a vision of justice, or rage? It is up to us to decide whether we will focus on that which supports our humanity, or negates it. We will be what we eat.