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SHAVUOT: CHEESECAKE, TEMPTATION, AND CONSERVATION

During the 2011 riots here in London, teachers and social workers were said to have been among the looters. British Prime Minister David Cameron called them opportunistic criminals. Perhaps temptation simply got the best of them.

Yielding to temptation may be pandemic in our culture. When we argue about mitigating climate change, the discussion is often framed as a question of progress versus conservation – but it may ultimately be revealing the tension between temptation and self-control. The average American releases about 19 times the amount of carbon into the atmosphere as the average Guatemalan; the average citizen of the United Kingdom releases about seven times as much carbon as the average Bulgarian; and the average Israeli releases about three times as much as the average Lebanese. Why? Objects of temptation, such as flat screen TVs and vacations to the Caribbean, all involve a large input of energy resources. And because we can acquire more objects, because we can fly more, we invariably do. We take what we want when we can, and scientists' warnings about the changes we're causing to our planet's environment are as unheeded as a London policeman's calls for looters to restrain themselves.

“Cities all over the world have caught America's affluenza,” Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Thomas Friedman wrote in his book, “Hot, Flat and Crowded.” For example, he cited the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, where a single Walmart sold 1,100 air conditioners during one weekend. The world is not just getting more crowded with people, it is becoming more crowded with consumers who have the economic clout to acquire the objects of their temptations.

And it is temptation that brings us to the humble cheesecake of Shavuot. Many of us are familiar with the routine – the all night Torah learning, the battle of will against the nosh table, the inevitable succumbing to copious amounts of cheesecake in the midnight hours, and, finally, the regret over the calories. But this creamy custom may be the antidote to temptation. Let's begin with a question that has multiple answers: Why do we eat cheese and milk products on Shavuot?

According to *G'ulat Yisrael* (as quoted in *Sefer Ta'amie Haminhagim*, par. 623), the dairy tradition goes directly back to the first meal after revelation. The households in Israel were in a quandary. God had just given the nation the laws of how to keep kosher and the cooks realized that all their previous meals had rendered their pots and pans unkosher and therefore unusable. The first meal needed to be cold so that the food wouldn't come into contact with heated unkosher vessels, so they turned to milk and cheese that didn't need to be heated. Today we continue this 3,000-year-old tradition with cheesecake.

More than an anecdotal tale, the story of cheesecake is a story of community wide self-restraint. In keeping with most of the pivotal moments in the Torah narrative, the revelation at Sinai is distinguished by massive quantities of barbecued meat. On the morning of revelation, Moses had erected 12 altars of roasting cows (Exodus 24:4-5) and sprinkled their warm blood on the people (Exodus 24:8). The odor of meat must have permeated the entire camp. One can imagine the scene, with the sacrificial animals burning, blood sprinkled on head and clothing, and the people returning home and asking hungrily: What's for dinner? And the mothers serve up a plate of yogurt.

It's a morality tale written into the ritual of food: The first thing Israel does with its new Torah is curb desire.

Just days before the revelation at Sinai, the people cried out to Moses and Aaron: "Better that God would have killed us in Egypt, whilst we sat by our pots of meat, eating to satiation, than that we should die of hunger in the desert!" (Exodus 16:3)

Before Sinai, the nation would have chosen to remain as meat-sated slaves rather than struggle for food in the desert. After Sinai, they spurned the very cows they sacrificed. When did the self-restraint begin?

A midrash tells the story of the moment just before revelation: God is worried that the nation of Israel will reject the covenantal obligations and wants guarantors on the contract. The nation offers the patriarchs, but God refuses: "They are already in my debt, they cannot be your guarantors."

"But who is not yet in your debt?" Israel asks.

"The babies," God replies.

"Then they brought their babies on the breast, and those yet in the womb. Their mothers' bellies became as glass, and the little ones saw the Lord of the Universe . . . The Lord said to them: Will you be guarantors for your parents that if they do not observe this Torah you will be held liable? Yes, they said." (Midrash Tehillim 8).

Take the Midrash with a fantastical grain of salt, but listen closely to its deeper motives and outcomes. Behavior transformation from meat-addicted slave to self-disciplined covenantal agent is facilitated with a glance at the children through the looking glass.

"What matters when it comes to self-control isn't so much willpower as vision – the ability to see the future, so that the long run consequences of our short run choices are vividly clear," Daniel Akst wrote in his book, "We Have Met the Enemy."

Religion is grounded in long-range planning and long-term visions. Rites and rituals endure because they were never intended to fulfill our immediate gratifications; they stand the test of time because they are our response to the eternal. Choosing dairy over meat for one meal may seem prosaic and small, but it is the first time Israel says no to temptation. Choosing walking over driving or turning down the thermostat in winter may be small acts in themselves, but they are part of the same set of careful choices made because our children are forever holding their bated breath as our guarantors.

On Shavuot, every bite of cheesecake is a reminder of long-term patterns of decision-making, that God's command is more meaningful than the craving for barbeque, and that our unborn children are watching us through the looking glass of time. The failure to respond to the crisis of climate change and to redirect our lives in accordance with scientific data is a failure not only of imagination into our future, but the acceptance of the tyranny of temptation into our present.

Source: Rabbi Natan Levy