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Food Fight
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For many of my generation, “Food Fight” conjures up the memory of the scene from *Animal House* when John Belushi calls out: “food fight” and all hell breaks loose. But in the current context, with more and more attention being given to what we eat, how much we eat, the human cost (labor) of how food is grown and the emerging consciousness about locally sourced food I think “food fight” suggests the ethical and spiritual challenges that accompany our insatiable appetites not only for food, but for just about everything.

What first seemed like a quirky offshoot of the Environmental movement—food justice-- has become a full fledged social movement of its own. It is worth taking stock of what this movement is about and what it might mean for us.

There is a shelf-full of recent books that have raised the consciousness of Americans about food. Books like Michael Pollan’s, *The Omnivores Dilemma* and Jonathan Safran Foer’s, *Eating Animals*, each in its own way, offer some simple wisdom that is convincing. Eating less meat, more plants, fruits and vegetables and focusing on locally grown crops is good for your health and good for the planet.

The data is pretty compelling and while it leads more and more people to become vegetarians or vegans, there is much one can do short of that. Consider the following:

- There are 800 million people in the world today who are considered food insecure. That number includes one in six Americans! Yet the majority of corn, soy and wheat grown in the world is used to feed pigs, chickens and livestock. It is estimated that the world could produce 5-10 times more calories than is currently the case if we ate grains directly and not use it for animal feed.
- Another study looked at the amount of energy it takes to raise and harvest animals. If Americans cut their meat consumption by just 20% a year, it would be the equivalent fossil fuel savings as if every driver in the U.S. turned in their current car and replaced it with a Prius.
- Michelle Obama’s campaign against childhood obesity has pointed the finger at the U.S. food industry for their marketing of highly processed, fat and sugar laced food. Though we can choose not to buy this kind of unhealthy food, our appetites are conditioned, if not addicted, to the very foods that are so harmful.
- Nor is this a matter of whether we will look good in a bathing suit during the summer. The Center for Disease Control estimates that ¾ of all U.S. health care costs can be traced to diet (e.g. heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and a third of all cancers!).

Of course like so much of human behavior, knowing what is good for us doesn’t always lead to a change of habit. We learn the lesson in this week’s Biblical portion—*Beha’alotcha*.

The Israelites are, at this point in the Biblical narrative, wandering in the desert and romanticizing their recollections of Egypt as a place where food, particularly meat, was abundant. In the desert God was providing a vegetarian option—Manna- on a daily basis, and a double portion on Friday so that no collection had to be done on Shabbat. But the Manna had become stale (pun intended) and the people called for a return to Egypt just so they could eat meat. Consumption had become more important than freedom.

Moses looks to God for some relief from the ongoing complaining of the people and God complies by sending a flock of quail that conveniently drop out of the sky in the vicinity of the Israelite encampment. The quail is both a response to an outcry and a test. And the Israelites fail the test. They consume so much quail so quickly that a plague overtakes the tribe and thousands die, many with the meat of quail still in their mouths. Our ancestors ate themselves to death. The Torah calls the place of this incident, *Kibrot Taavah*, the graves of consumption! It may foreshadow our own future. The graves of consumption, indeed!

If *Kibroth Taavah* is the time and place that the children of Israel faced their consumption test, today humanity faces its own consumption test. We simply cannot continue to consume to our appetite's content. It is bad for humans and it is bad for the planet. Food, water, oil, forests, farmland... the list goes on and on. With the developing world increasingly aspiring to live "first world lives", we are aware that the lifestyle that we believe is our right and privilege is unsustainable. This is our food fight.

As with the Israelites in the desert we need to ask ourselves: Are we slaves to our appetites or are we capable of being motivated by a higher consciousness that limits what we consume, how much we consume, and how we produce that which nourishes our bodies?

There is a Native American teaching that says: "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children". All of us who live on this planet need to re-assess our consumption patterns. It is an obligation that is even more incumbent on those of us fortunate enough to live in the United States and who enjoy the comforts of being of the middle class.

We owe it to ourselves and we owe it to our children.