



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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## **SERMON TITLE:**

**Why Jews Love Food**

**A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE**

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

# Yisro

## Why Jews Love Food

I would like to talk about an important American holiday to be held tomorrow, Sunday, February 6. I'm referring, of course, to the Super Bowl.

Now, I don't know how many of you are truly hard-core football fans, but I do know this—some calendars actually list Super Bowl Day just like they list Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur or Thanksgiving. For some people, it seems, it's almost literally a holiday.

What's all this excitement about the Super Bowl? What's so special about it? I've spoken to many people who confessed that they don't even find the game particularly interesting—it's just that they love getting together with the entire family.

Let's take a look at this week's Torah portion—the parshah in which G-d finally gave our People the Torah.

But when the Jewish Nation was still in Egypt, G-d gave them several mitzvos—before they got the Torah.

The first mitzvah given to the Jews as a nation while still in Egypt was "HaChodesh hazeh lachem"—"This month shall be the head of the months." This was the mitzvah to count the months of the Hebrew calendar. Until then, the Jews were not obligated to keep a calendar and to know the exact date—knowing what day of the week it was so they could keep Shabbos was enough. However, it was not important to know when the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month of Nissan, for example, would be—because there were no Jewish holidays then.

But when they left Egypt, however, they began celebrating the holidays, which depend on the calendar—and so they were given their very first mitzvah.

In reality, however, this mitzvah was “handed over to the Jewish courts”—the actual performance of the mitzvah, the calculating of the calendar’s dates, was carried out by a select few. It was the Jewish court system that would declare exactly when the new month was and announce it to all—it was not a mitzvah that everyone had a part of.

So what was the first mitzvah given to the Jewish people that every individual Jew had a part of? The Korbon Pesach—the Passover Sacrifice.

When it comes to the Korbon Pesach, the halachah, or Jewish law, is that all the meat of the sacrifice must be eaten. None can be left over. On top of that, all the meat must be eaten by midnight. None can be left over to the morning. Sorry! No lamb chop lunch tomorrow.

And on top of that, there’s something special about the Korbon Pesach: the Torah plans the party for you. Since you need to finish all the meat that very night, what happens if you have a small family and you’d never be able to finish all that meat in one night? So the Torah (Shmos 12:4) tells us, “But if the household is too small for a lamb,” which, as Rashi explains, means “that they can’t eat it and they’ll end up with leftovers,” “then he and his neighbor who is nearest to his house shall take [one] according to the number of people, each one according to his ability to eat...”

In other words, split one lamb with your neighbors so that together, you’ll all finish all the meat. The Torah advises you to invite your neighbors over for a meal—and if that’s not enough, invite even more neighbors!

Essentially, the mitzvah is for Jews to sit together at one meal. In other words, the first mitzvah given to the Jewish Nation as a whole, the first mitzvah that every Jew is obligated to observe, is to make a joint meal and to eat together.

The first mitzvah given by G-d to the Jewish People was not that they pray together—or even that they pray separately. The first mitzvah was not to put on tefillin, light Shabbos candles and so on. Rather, the foundation was specifically that Jews get together and have a joint meal together—a “family sacrifice.”

Now, the “hero” of the entire Book of Shmos (Exodus) is Moshe

Rabbeinu. Besides being the man who redeemed the Jews from Egypt, and being the greatest prophet in Jewish history and the one through whom G-d gave us the Torah, Moshe also established several rules for the Jewish Nation.

For example, everyone has heard of “sitting shivah.” Where did this custom come from? From Moshe Rabbeinu. Maimonides (beginning of Laws of Mourning) tells us that “Moshe established the seven days of mourning and the seven days of feasting [for weddings].” Thus, shivah is not something that was invented in Europe or in the times of the Talmud. It already existed in Moshe’s time.

Likewise, the concept of Sheva Brachos, during which a young newly-married couple celebrate seven days after their wedding within family circles—even this rule was created by Moshe Rabbeinu.

But there’s another famous rule also created by Moshe Rabbeinu: Reading the Torah every Shabbos and holiday in shul. “Moshe Rabbeinu established that the Jews read the Torah publicly every Shabbos, Monday and Thursday in the morning so that three days never go by without hearing the Torah” (Maimonides, Laws of Tefilah 12:1).

Still, before any of these rules, Moshe established a very important rule for the Jewish Nation.

Everyone’s heard of “nosh”—what is commonly known today as junk food. You know, just running out of the house and grabbing something to eat, or nibbling a little something here, something there, not eating a normal, organized meal. The Talmud (Tractate Yuma 75b) tells us, “In the beginning, the Israelites were like chickens pecking in the garbage”—the Jewish Nation didn’t have set meal times; everyone ate a little bit whenever they had time. They noshed.

That is, “until Moshe came along and set meal times for them,” the Talmud concludes.

How so? In the mornings they would eat *mon*, the Manna from Heaven, and in the evenings they’d eat meat, as the Torah (Shmos 16:8) tells us, “And Moshe said, ‘When Hashem give you meat in the evenings to eat and bread in the mornings for satisfaction.’ ”

Thus, Moshe established two meals a day: a morning meal consisting mainly of bread, and an evening meal consisting mainly of meat. And this is basically how it is to this very day. Only on Shabbos do Jews really have the custom of eating three meals.

Now, why was it so important to Moshe that the Jews have organized meals? Seemingly, who cares if one pecks like a chicken? Why was it so important for the Jews to have mealtimes established for them even before the giving of the Torah?

The story is told about a British Jew who came to visit the Rebbe in the year 1970. At that time, the man was a college student at the University of London.

The man had barely been in his audience with the Rebbe for ten minutes when the Rebbe asked him whether Jewish students at the University had a place they could eat a kosher meal.

The man answered that they were currently repairing the Hillel House on campus, and that the renovations would be completed in October, and only then would there be a place for Jewish students to eat a kosher meal.

Now, the man's audience was on the Tenth of Shvat, which is typically around January or early February. So the Rebbe gave him a look and asked him: "And what will be with kosher food until October?" And then the Rebbe advised him to organize a place where one could eat kosher food, and to invite the Jewish students to eat there.

The man became very excited. He said to the Rebbe, "That's an excellent idea!", immediately adding that he could also bring speakers to deliver talks on Judaism to bring the students closer to Judaism, etc.

The Rebbe lifted his hands and said to him, "That sounds like a great idea, but that's not what I meant. What I am interested in is young Jewish men eating kosher meals next to young Jewish women instead of eating a non kosher meal near non Jewish women."

When Jews sit together and eat together, it hinders intermarriage and encourages marriage among Jews—and this is the most important goal there is. And this brings us to our Torah portion of the week, Yisro.

In this week's Torah portion, we read about how Yisro came to meet Moshe Rabbeinu in the desert, together with his daughter Tziporah—who was Moshe's wife—and their two sons, Gershom and Eliezer.

The Torah tells us that Moshe went out to meet Yisro, "and he kissed him and each inquired of the welfare of the other." (Somebody once asked, "Why doesn't it say the same thing about his wife and kids? Wasn't he excited to see them too?" And the answer is, it's obvious that he did. The big news here is that he was so happy, he even embraced his father-in-law!)

But anyways, we read further (Chapter 18, verse 12), "And Aharon and all the elders of Israel came to eat bread with the father-in-law of Moshe before G-d."

So of course, everyone asks an obvious question: Since when is eating a meal considered to be "before G-d"? Is eating a religious experience? And the answer is: Yes!

When Jews get together to eat, it's already a religious experience of some sort. It's a Jewish experience. Why? Because then there's a greater chance that Jews will marry each other. In other words, if you make that most common and most enjoyable of human experiences—a dinner, lunch or other meal together with friends or family—into a Jewish experience, then it's far more than an ordinary meal. It becomes a powerful tool for community building and identity building.

Which leads to another question. People often ask, "Why did the Torah tell us to eat meat?" Your friendly neighborhood Chabad rabbi will try to explain that non-kosher meat can make a person take on the characteristics of the animal eaten—making the person more cruel and predatory. But that only explains not eating non-kosher meat—but keeping kosher is not just about meat, but about everything: bread, milk, wine and so forth.

There are schools of Jewish thought that hold that the kosher laws really stem from a concern for the unity and survival of the Jewish People, so that they do not assimilate among the nations. They find hints to this in the Torah. Here are excerpts from the Book of Vayikra, Chapters 2, 24 and 27: "I am the L-rd Your G-d Who separated you from the nations, and you shall separate between the pure animals and the impure ones and between the pure birds and impure ones... and I separate you from the nations to be for me."

And therefore, the Sages banned drinking non-Jewish wine and eating non-Jewish bread—all because of intermarriage. As the Talmud says, "their bread and oil [is banned] because of their wine," meaning, because it will lead to drinking their wine, "and their wine [is banned] because of their daughters," meaning, you knock back a drink or two with your friendly neighbor at the local pub or at his house, and his daughter happens to be there, and you can imagine the rest. In making these bans, the Sages penetrated to the heart of the mitzvah of kosher, explaining that it's there to prevent intermarriage.

Thus, when Jews eat together, it's no less than a form of serving G-d.

This, my friends, is ultimately why all of Judaism is based on meals: Shabbos meals, the Passover seder, Rosh Hashanah with family, asking "Where are we going to eat?" and "Where are we going to break the fast?" at Yom Kippur, latke night on Chanukah, the grand Purim feast... it's all so that Jews sit around one table, figuratively and literally—and not to hear lectures on Judaism, but for one limited purpose: so that Jews marry Jews.

So, let us take our Jewish food, and our Jewish eating, more seriously. I'm not saying stuff yourself! Especially if you're on a diet, or need to be on one. That's no joking matter. But one message of this week's Parshah, and an important one at that, is that mealtime has the power to bring people together like few other things. Just ask any Super Bowl fan!

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