

Episode 28

Emor

Anyone who has been to France knows that the French have a kind of dominance and superiority when it comes to food and cuisine. I'm not just saying this because of the American tendency to assume that, if it's French, it's somehow classier or more refined. Actually, the French really should get some credit for their mastery of culinary arts. Language itself bears this out. So much of our vocabulary, when it comes to fine dining, is made up of French words. *Soup du jour, bon appétit, cuisine, sauter, mélange, hor d'oeuvres, entré, a la carte, apéritif, vinaigrette, a la mode, cordon bleu, somellier, omelette*. You know what, I take that back. The French really are better than the rest of us.

The French also have a culture which reveres food. I lived in the South of France when I was 21 on a study abroad semester and I stayed with a family. At some point the topic of cheese came up. What you eat in America isn't really cheese, I was told by the son of the family. It doesn't taste like anything. He was, in a way, correct. In France, the cheese is bursting with all kinds of exotic flavors. The French tend not to refrigerate their cheese, which brings out all kinds of new tastes and zings. They also don't pasteurize their cheese, as this destroys much of the flavor. Put another way, the French want to *taste* their cheese, they want to *savor* it. This type of loving attention paid to food runs throughout French cuisine, from butter-soaked French omelettes, to perfectly-crisp baguettes, to flaky croissants. Each is like its own work of culinary art.

But even though French food is so worshiped and so delicious, part of French cuisine is to never overeat and overconsume. This was something I could not wrap my head around when I lived in France as a young American student. Growing up in America, my attitude had always been, if something tastes good, I should eat as much of it as I can, so as to maximize pleasure and enjoyment. Why would someone have the ability to eat more of delicious food and voluntarily turn it down? This made no sense to me at the time, and to some degree still doesn't to this day.

My French friend said to me: "The French don't want to have *seconds* the way Americans do. They take a few bites and that is enough." At the time, this was an absolutely mind-blowing and devastating claim this young Frenchman was making. This sounded like torture, honestly. To only eat a few bites of something so tasty? The French also don't snack, he said. We only eat during meals. Another shocking revelation. How could someone wait six or seven hours between lunch and dinner, when they could so easily walk down the street and buy a baguette or a tort and buy and eat it anywhere and at any time? Put another way, why wait?

If you're hungry, why wait? Why wait? I believe I have heard this question used on an American candy bar commercial at some point. And it seems to be a legitimate question. As you can see, I continue to be a victim of the American ethos toward food, despite having overcome it to a large extent.

Sadly, the attitude of "maximize pleasure" and "give me more" is not limited just to food in America, and indeed, throughout much of the world. After all, American culture has more or less become the culture of the world. We have some terms for this attitude: greed, capitalism, gluttony, craving. As you can hear, these are not positive-sounding words. The American attitude toward food is arguably similar to its attitude toward money, consumption, happiness, success, achievement, power. Give me more. The first time felt good, so the second time will feel even better. And so forth. If more can be had, then why stop at what you already have. This is, indeed, a concept which so many of us have readily internalized. The alternative concept, I have *enough*, I am *grateful* for what I have, *more* would actually *injure me* rather than *benefit* me, is not so easy for those in capitalist cultures to "stomach" and "digest."

The curse of always wanting more was, however, around long before rampant American consumerism and unparalleled American obesity. Although I will say that in previous ages there was something a bit more polished and cultivated about it. Typically, we think of the two deadly sins of greed and gluttony as limited to the fields of money and food. But Goethe's legendary drama *Faust* shows how greed and gluttony and craving can extend into more refined realms. When the play *Faust* opens up, Dr.

Faust is a middle-aged professor in the midst of suicidal despair. His despair comes from the realization that his craving for absolute knowledge has never been satisfied. Despite devoting his life to study, he is just as ignorant as on the day he began his pursuit. He decries: “Ah! Now I’ve done Philosophy / I’ve finished Law and Medicine, / And sadly even Theology: / Taken fierce pains, from end to end. / Now here I am, a fool for sure! / No wiser than I was before: / Master, Doctor’s what they call me, / And I’ve been ten years, already, / Crosswise, arcing, to and fro, / Leading my students by the nose, / And see that we can know - nothing!”

Poor Faust, we think. In the next line we learn that Faust is also an atheist, so he cannot give himself up to Christian faith as a way of finding absolute knowledge. He is entirely on his own in this endeavor.

Goethe makes clear that there is something greedy and hubristic about Faust’s quest. During a conversation between God and the Devil in heaven, the Devil, Mephistopheles, makes the following remarks about Faust: “From Heaven he demands the brightest star / And from the Earth, Joy’s highest art, / And all the near and all the far, / Fails to release his throbbing heart.” In a later scene, Faust cries to Mephistopheles, “What is the point of life / if it’s not possible / to wear the crown of all humanity atop my head / to which all of my senses yearn?”

Yet, what’s fascinating about Faust’s character is that he is not craving riches or power or even eternal life. In past *Faust* dramas, Doctor Faustus would sell his soul to the devil in exchange for twenty-four years of a life of sinning. Basically, Doctor Faustus could goof off for twenty-four years, but in the end he would have to give up his soul. With Goethe’s Faust, however, these former desires—wealth, drunkenness, adultery, mischief—are no longer appealing. Goethe’s Faust doesn’t want to sin, rather, he wants to learn. Ironically, Goethe is suggesting that there is something just as “sinful” as wanting to *learn* as wanting to drink, fornicate, and pillage.

As stated, Goethe’s drama opens up with Faust realizing that book-knowledge will never fulfill him. Yet, even though Faust gives up on scholarly knowledge as a path toward the absolute, he doesn’t give up on the wish for absolute knowledge itself. Rather, he just wants to find a new way to attain it which will be more effective than reading books. His first tactic is to turn to magic.

After throwing aside his books, Faust states: “So I’ve given myself to Magic art, / To see if, through Spirit powers and lips, / I might have all secrets at my fingertips.” Yet, upon making this decision, Faust’s very next step is to open up another *book* on magic. After dismissing books, Faust unconsciously goes right back to them. What is Goethe saying here? Goethe is indicating that even when we believe we have reversed course, the same vice simply takes a new form. Faust’s problem is not that he has studied too much, as Faust believes. Rather, his problem is that he cannot give up his greed for superior understanding. His lust for the absolute is so ingrained in him that he quests after it even when he thinks he is overcoming it. He is like the cocaine addict who turns to gambling to overcome his addiction.

This dynamic will become more palpable when Faust and Mephistopheles finally meet. Mephisto, as we know, wants Faust’s soul. And what does Faust want in exchange? Not twenty-four years of sinning. Rather, all Faust wants is to be able to say “Yes” to the Moment. He only wants to, for a moment, stop craving, and just dwell in pleasant satisfaction. Faust says to Mephisto: “When, to the Moment then, I say: / ‘Ah, stay a while! You are so lovely!’ / Then you can grasp me: then I will gladly go down to hell with you.”

For those familiar with mindfulness meditation and Buddhism, this would seem to be a major step forward for Faust. He has finally learned that true peace and bliss can only be found in the moment, in the now, not through striving toward the Infinite, not through anticipation of a

future state. But Goethe wants to say: not so fast. Even though Faust now wants to live in the moment, this is still the same old Faust, just repackaged in more palatable clothes. Faust's greed, craving, lust, selfishness have not disappeared. Now, they are simply being directed away from bookish knowledge as salvation toward the Moment as salvation. But the underlying drive is still, Goethe seems to indicate, rather toxic. And indeed, Faust's wish to dwell in the Moment will not lead him toward Enlightenment and Bliss, but rather will get him in all kinds of trouble. The play ends with his lover committing suicide in prison and with Faust screaming, "All the misery of the world is mine."

This is the paradox at the heart of *Faust* and even at the heart of meditation and Buddhism. What happens when we crave to stop craving? What happens when we look at the Moment greedily, much as a capitalist looks at future profits?

This is, indeed, a common quandary for those who embark on meditation as a path toward bliss. In Eckhart Tolle's bestseller, *The Power of Now*, the guru Tolle rails against those people who only seek happiness in some future state. Tolle writes that "the mind creates an obsession with the future as an escape from the unsatisfactory present." He asks: "Are you always focused on becoming, achieving, and attaining? Do you believe that if you acquire more things you will become more fulfilled? Are you waiting for a man or woman to give meaning to your life?" Hey Tolle, why don't you tell us what you really think?

Tolle advocates instead living in the present, in the "power of now." Tolle writes, "The present moment holds the key to liberation. But you cannot find the present moment as long as you *are* your mind." The book largely continues in this vein. Tolle continues to rail against thinking about the past or future as a form of toxic egotism. But if you can somehow manage to get yourself into the present moment, you will achieve everlasting bliss.

Is this really Enlightened thinking, or just a game of whack-a-mole? In other words, has the wish for salvation in the future state simply assumed a new guise, new clothing, as a wish for salvation in the present state?

It is apparent how this book relates to Dr. Faust. Faust was always striving for some future state of omniscience and eternity. And then he came to the same realization as Eckhart Tolle: I will never find this bliss in the future. Rather, if I could just live in the present then I will finally achieve inner peace. But Goethe points out how Faust really hasn't changed at all. If you are striving to not strive, craving to not crave, yearning to not yearn, aren't you just kind of right back where you started?

The critical difference, I think, is that if and when you ever do get into the present state in which all craving, fear, expectations melt away, then you really have transcended so many of the curses of the human condition. Whereas buying more things will never bring you peace, dwelling in the present moment actually has the potential to do so. Yet where Faust, and Tolle, err, is, I think, depicting the present moment as a greasy salesperson might. Just get into the present moment, and all of your problems will be solved! You're one step away from eternal salvation! Indeed, for Faust, and for Tolle, this is highly ironic, as both are keenly aware of how promises of salvation lead people by the nose, lead people astray, deceive people. And yet, here they are, promoting eternal salvation once more without even realizing it.

To be fair, I am being a bit hard on Eckhart Tolle. He discusses the complexities of finding the present moment. Even if he does depict the present moment as a panacea, he qualifies his position often, and he's probably giving us the right advice. Still, I think holding out the present moment to us like a dangling carrot is a bit irresponsible. It is strikingly similar to

Mephistopheles' temptation of Faust with the dangling carrot of the "schönen Augenblick"—the beautiful moment.

Can this paradox be resolved? How can we strive to not strive? Actually, Tolle gives a mildly useful answer toward the end of his book. He acknowledges that many people have spent their years or decades *trying* to get to nirvana through meditation, workshops, spiritual books, etc. Tolle says that the reason these people have been unsuccessful is that they haven't fully *accepted* their non-peace, they haven't forgiven themselves for not being at peace. According to Tolle, "The moment you *completely* accept your non-peace, your non-peace becomes transmuted into peace. Anything you accept fully will get you there, will take you into peace. This is the miracle of surrender."

I don't know about you, but for me this isn't exactly encouraging. Accepting that you will never be at peace as a way to attaining peace seems to be so elusive. It is as impossible as craving to be in the present moment, the only place where you won't crave.

In the parsha for this week, *Emor*, we read about more restrictions for the *Cohanim*, the annual holidays, and laws regarding animal sacrifices. We also receive a rather cryptic and fascinating command from the Torah. The Torah tells us that when you are collecting the fruits and vegetables and grains from your land—in short, the harvest—you shouldn't take it all back home with you. Instead, the Torah says that we should leave the edges of the field untouched for the gleaners. Gleaners were the poor people who would gather this leftover part of the harvest for themselves and presumably their families. You might even know the famous 1857 painting by the French artist Jean François-Millet depicting three women—three gleaners—picking up wheat after the harvest. These are gleaners, and apparently they have a long history.

The immediate understanding of this story is that you shouldn't be a greedy bastard and keep all the food for yourself—far more than you could possibly need—lest poor people starve to death. But there is another side to the story as well. To leave some of the harvest not only benefits the poor but also benefits the farm owner. This law is a reminder that even if we could have *more*, we shouldn't always want *more*. *More* is the problem of capitalist American dining, *more* is the problem of Faust, and *more* is even the problem of meditation gurus who are not satisfied with the current level of Enlightenment they are experiencing. By relinquishing our lust for *more*, we not only stop ourselves from becoming overly fat and overly learned. We also learn to remove ourselves from the devilish cycle of jumping from craving to satisfaction, craving to satisfaction. In this way, the gleaning law from the Torah benefits the farm owner just as much as it does the gleaners.

Now, I recognize that this is not exactly a groundbreaking idea. Who hasn't heard before that you should be satisfied with what you have and so forth. But actually, there is a deeper point I wish to make. Both Faust and Eckart Tolle realized that we should put an end to craving and instead find peace in the present moment. But what is missing from their accounts is *how* to get there. Both seem to believe the present moment can be achieved rapidly, instantaneously, as a kind of "quick fix" to the curse of craving. Faust naïvely thinks that he can philosophize his way into the present moment. Tolle spends most of his book talking about the present moment in abstract and philosophical terms. He continually gives the impression that the present moment is just around the corner, as it were.

Yet, to learn to accept things as they are, to learn to cease craving more, is, I believe, a practice. A practice which must be cultivated over time. It doesn't happen overnight. And it doesn't happen through ideas. It happens through experience and exercise. Daily meditation, daily study, daily journaling, daily practice of acceptance. It requires an entire rewiring of our

minds. Faust's objective to dwell in the moment was not where he erred; rather, it was his ignorance as to how to get there.

A few years ago, I was having a Shabbat dinner with an Israeli family at their home in the Negev desert. Delicious homemade challah had been prepared. At the end of the meal, after all the food was eaten, there still remained a bit of challah on the table. I told the hostess that the challah was so good, that I was considering eating the last piece, but I knew I didn't really "need" it, given how much I'd eaten so far.

She told me, "You're always supposed to leave a bit of challah bread left on the table after the meal. This is what the Torah teaches us." I would later realize that she was alluding to the verses of *Emor* regarding the gleaners. Notice here, that the teaching is clearly not meant for the poor, as it's not as though she was going to donate the Challah to beggars outside. Once again, I was caught off-guard. You mean you want me to forego eating something delicious just for its own sake? Once again, I was thrown back to my life in the South of France, where a young Frenchman had disabused me of the notion that you should eat until pleasure is maximized. Once again, I had a bit of trouble wrapping my American head around this idea. If there is delicious Challah on the table, why would I just *leave* it there? In short, why would I stop when I could have *more*?

The Torah, then, does not simply *tell* us to stop craving but also *shows* us how to do so. The Torah doesn't say: "hey man, stop craving." Because this wouldn't help us. Rather, the Torah gives us a practice which will allow us to cultivate gratitude and acceptance—purposely leaving some of the harvest in the field, purposely leaving some Challah on the Shabbat dinner table, even if you could eat more and get more pleasure.

Here, I would like to wish you a *bon appetit*. But actually, the French actually don't use this phrase. They find it boorish and uncouth. Why? Because, in French, this would mean *I hope you digest your food well* and not *enjoy your meal*. In France, once food became an art form, something to be appreciated, savored, relished, it became very improper to say *bon appetit*. This phrase made eating seem animalistic and slothful. It was better to say, *bon diner* enjoy your dinner or even *bonne degustation*, relish your food.

So, Shabbat Shalom, and *bon diner*, and *excusez-moi* for the largely unamerican podcast episode.