

Life Tip #2 – Eat the Air
Haftarah Noach
Isaiah 54:1 – 55:5

Most mornings when I wake up, I immediately face a conflict. Usually, what I would like to do is eat a giant breakfast and drink a big cup of coffee. First thing. But then the wiser part of my brain chimes in and tells me that, before I eat or drink, I should get in my daily yoga and meditation practice. I know from experience that if I eat before meditating and practicing yoga, too much time has gone by already. I find myself rushed and also a bit less alert.

Anyway, some days I eat first, some days I meditate first. I can't say whether one choice is intrinsically better than the other. But what I can say is that I have regretted the decision to *eat* perhaps hundreds of times, whereas I don't think I have ever regretted beginning my day with meditation and stretching.

Nevertheless, each morning, I always feel pulled between the forces of eating and of meditating.

The truth is that, the temptation to eat stays with me for pretty much the entire day. Somewhere in my mind is almost always the thought of the next meal or snack. In fact, if sat me down and really questioned me, really pressed me, there are very few, if any, situations in which I would rather be doing something else than eating. I often feel sad when a meal is over because I know it will then be several hours at least before I will get to eat again.

Interestingly, my favorite writer, Franz Kafka, did not have this problem. Instead, he seemed to have the opposite issue. Kafka was never a big fan of eating. He was extremely skinny throughout his life. And he felt shame, it seems, about his lack of desire for food and his strange relationship with food. His father, Hermann, was the son of a Kosher butcher—Kafka's grandfather, Jakob. His father was a big, burly man, who ate copiously and who often had a giant slab of meat on his lunch or dinner plate. Franz, by contrast, was a vegetarian. While his father ate hearty meals of meat and potatoes at the dinner table, Franz had a plate of vegetarian delicacies like dried fruits, nuts, and yoghurts. Hermann would often look across the table at his son and shake his head in frustration and confusion.

Franz seems to have felt that there was something wrong with him in his lack of desire for food and his perennial skinniness. Many of his protagonists have toxic, disturbing relationships and interactions with food. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa, after he transforms into a giant insect, no longer has the same desire for human food. After Gregor's metamorphosis, his sister Grete, hoping that her brother will eat something, brings him out a bowl of sweet milk with a slice of white bread. But because he is now a beetle, Gregor no longer has interest in this food, and leaves it untouched. In Kafka's short story "In the Penal Colony," a prisoner is sentenced to death in which he is to be executed by a creaky, elaborate machine. Part of the punishment sequence is for the prisoner to chew on a piece of felt cloth and then, if he has the desire, lick up a bowl of rice pudding which is placed before him.

Kafka's bizarre and antagonistic relationship with food is most felt in his short story "A Hunger Artist." This is a story about a man whose artistic talent is to be able to go long periods of time without eating. He is called the hunger artist, and he fasts for up to forty days at a time. He even wishes he could fast longer, but after forty days his audience compels him to finally eat, as the people can no longer withstand his fasting. The short story concludes when he is discovered inside his cage by a circus employee. He has become so thin that he can barely be seen amid the straw on which he lies. Here, the story reaches its climax. The hunger artist

whispers into the ear of the circus employee the following words: “You should not be impressed by my fasting. I can’t do any otherwise.” “Why not?” asks the circus worker. “Because,” says the hunger artist, “I never could find any food which tasted good to me. If I had found it, believe me, I wouldn’t have done any of these performances and eaten myself full like you and everyone else.”

Here, we see how Kafka felt ashamed that he could not enjoy normal food like everyone else—and, of course, Kafka means here food both literally and metaphorically. But Kafka did have his own form of food which nourished him. And that was writing. The one thing in Kafka’s life which he kept coming back to, which gave him fulfillment, which satisfied his hunger, was to sit down at a desk and write. But as you can gather, Kafka, despite his legendary talent as a writer, seems to have felt that there was something pathological about a person who gets his “food” through writing literature.

The haftarah from this week, for the parsha of *Noach*, comes once again from the book of Isaiah. It is not exactly clear when Isaiah lived. Some say the eighth century B.C.E., as I mentioned last week. Other scholars believe that he was addressing the Jews in Babylon who had been deported from Judea after the first destruction of Jerusalem in the year 586 B.C.E. These Jews were longing for the day when they would return to the Holy City. And Isaiah gave them words of comfort and inspiration.

The connection with the parsha of Noach is the reference to the waters of Noah in verse nine of chapter fifty-four. Isaiah, it seems, speaks of the great flood to remind his exiled brothers and sisters that the destruction of one civilization has the potential to pave the way for a new humankind.

In chapter fifty-five, verses one and two, Isaiah talks about food. But his emphasis seems to be that real food is not that which nourishes our stomachs, but rather fills our souls. Isaiah cries: “Oh, all who are thirsty, come for water, Even if you have no money; Come, buy food and eat: Buy food without money, Wine and milk without cost. / Why do you spend money for what is not bread, Your earnings for what does not satisfy? Listen to me and eat what is good, and let your soul delight in fatness.” Rashi has commented that, when Isaiah uses the word “water,” what he really means is *Torah* and that we should seek out *teachings* which are better than mere wine and milk.

While Kafka may have felt shame at his desire to write literature rather than to eat a carnivorous meal, this likely has more to do with Kafka’s own neuroses and his contaminated relationship with his father than with the merits of eating over writing. The truth is that, as Isaiah points out, we ought to expand our conception of how we nourish ourselves and our bodies.

Meditation and yoga teach that we are not just our minds, our thoughts, and our immediate cravings. In fact, there is a whole universe of drives and forces within us—physical, spiritual, chemical—all competing for our attention, all competing for nourishment. One meditation practice to help comprehend this idea is the body scan. In the body scan, you bring attention to all parts of your body, quite literally from head to toe or toe to head, and bring relaxation into these regions. You will notice that there are many aspects of your body which you are ignoring and suppressing. Through the body scan, one often has realizations like: my right thumb actually kind of hurts, or I am tensing my upper left thigh far more than I need to, or even—it feels so good when I relax my tongue.

Now, when I wake up in the morning, one way in which I try to motivate myself to meditate is to remind myself that satisfying my desire for food is just one of my body’s dozens if not hundreds of morning requests. I tell myself that, while my stomach will thank me if I eat, my

hamstrings will also thank me if I stretch them, my neck will thank me if I soften its muscles, and my spirit will thank me if I allow myself to sit, be silent, and breathe deeply. I tell myself that breakfast is not the only thing I have available to eat in the morning. Often, one gets far more nourishment, not from eating food, but instead, from eating the air.