

FROM THE EDITOR

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Food plays a central role in Judaism. At our happiest times – Shabbos, Yom Tov, a wedding, etc. – it's even a mitzvah to eat.

But as I watched the multi-tiered serving plates piled high with colourful cakes, cookies, and pastries, the various salads swimming in mayonnaise, and the endless supplies of assorted chips and sugary fizzy drinks and “fruit” juices at a *Bracha* (what other Jews call a “*Kiddush*”) that I recently attended over Yom Tov, I couldn't help but think that we owe it to ourselves and, even more so, to our children to make better choices when it comes to the things we eat – and

not just with a few token fruit and vegetable platters. More importantly, we have a mitzvah to take care of ourselves and to guard our health. And, although we're meant to save our best things – clothes, delicacies, etc. – for Shabbos, “best” doesn't have to mean unhealthy.

Just how important are our food choices? Roughly half of American adults suffer from one or more preventable chronic diseases, “many of which are related to poor quality eating patterns and physical inactivity”, including cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, some cancers, and poor bone health. Making matters worse, “more than two-thirds of adults and nearly one-third of children and youth are overweight or obese.”¹

I admittedly wasn't always so bothered by such things. It's just over four years since I had my gallbladder out. What was a rather unpleasant experience at the time turned out to be a tremendous blessing in disguise. Besides some much-needed weight loss, it completely changed my perspective and relationship with food. For the first couple of weeks afterwards, I could barely even look at food and became acutely aware of what, how much, when, and even why I was eating. I no longer ate simply because it was “time” to do so, nor did I eat the amounts or even the things that I always had simply because, well, I always had. Some things that had been lifelong staples in my diet, such as pizza, made me queasy just to look at them.

And it's not just what we eat, but how much of it. During my recovery, I vividly remember being at a *melava malka* (lit: ‘escorting the Queen’, referring to the meal that we're meant to have after Shabbos) late one motzei Shabbos. Since I was still barely eating, I sat at the table almost like a spectator, watching as people piled their plates high with food, only to go back and do it all over again once they had finished their first helpings. It was absolutely surreal. It was like people were operating on auto-pilot without any thought involved, their minds completely shut off as they instinctively responded to the enticing aromas and the appetising platters of food set before them.

Were any of them really hungry? Hungry enough to polish off a single plate piled high with food – let alone two of them? After having finished *shaleshudes* (the third meal of Shabbos) only a short while ago and with the time somewhere around 9pm, I think it would be safe to say that they were almost certainly not hungry at all. And, like most South Africans, they'd likely be going to bed early as well, meaning they should have already stopped eating some time ago.

How often do we eat because we're actually hungry?

We live in an age in which we are blessed with an incredible abundance and variety of food, truly able to wholeheartedly thank Hashem for the *chein* – the attractiveness – of that food (as we say in the first paragraph of the *bentching*). In fact, the average size dinner plate has grown in just the last 50 years or so from about 7 to 9 inches to between 11 and 12 inches – with restaurants often using even larger plates. Portion sizes of food have also dramatically increased, with fast food restaurants, for example, offering portions that range from 2 to 5 times their original size. There are obvious reasons why obesity rates continue to rise year after year.

The days of Oliver Twist are long gone. When we take a second helping, it's not because we're actually hungry like he was, it's because we enjoyed the food, or we're bored, or it's right there in front of us, or because we're socialising, or a myriad of other reasons.

We need to turn off the auto pilot and pay a bit more attention not only to what we're consuming, but just how much of it we're consuming. It's a matter of life and death.

Mazel tov to Martyn Samuels and the rest of the JL team on celebrating the 11th birthday of *Jewish Life*! May the magazine continue to grow and expand its influence around the world, and may it go from strength to strength.

ROBERT SUSSMAN,
EDITOR

¹www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015/guidelines/introduction/nutrition-and-health-are-closely-related/

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