

‘Real Eating:’ A Medieval Spanish Jewish View of Gastronomic Authenticity

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In medieval Jewish sources on gastronomy, the authenticity of what or how one eats and drinks is treated primarily as a philosophical and theological issue rather than an aesthetic one. And yet, my consideration of one important term for authentic eating in these sources, *akhilah vada'it*, ‘real eating,’ raises many of the same sorts of questions about the nature of authenticity that other papers in this year symposium do, even those concerned primarily with modern and post-modern gastronomy –though it may answer them quite differently.

So what makes eating ‘authentic’? If we turn to the rabbinic commentaries on the Torah, the *midrashim* which refer to *akhilah vadait*, or to the discussions of it in medieval Jewish mystical texts like the Zohar and Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava’s *Shulhan Shel Arba*, the particular text upon which I will focus, these are the questions they pose.¹ Is authentic, that is ‘real eating,’ a physiological or intellectual experience, or some sort of fusion of both? Is it primarily a matter of a specific selection of foods and drink? Or is a sense of authenticity achieved by performing meals according to certain prescribed ritual words and actions? Is eating authentic because it is rooted in the past, e.g., a re-enactment of Biblical precedents - ancient meals recounted in Jewish mythic history? Or is it authentic because it is both an anticipation and means to a future end, ‘salvation’ at the eschatological banquet – a ‘foretaste of the world to come’? Is the experience of authentic eating only a future hope or something that can actually be realized in the present? Is the experience

¹ Leviticus Rabbah 20:10; Numbers Rabbah 2:25; *Zohar* 1:104a, 2:126a; Bahya ben Asher, ‘Shulhan Shel Arba’.

limited to only certain groups, i.e., an ethnic group like the Jews, or a moral or intellectual elite – the ‘righteous’ or the *maskilim* (those ‘in the know,’ that is, who know the mystical secrets of kabbalah).² Is a meal authentic because it is connected to a deeper ‘reality:’ to divine beings, God, the supernatural?³ Or when it is an ecstatic experience? The medieval Jewish mystics say that ‘real eating’ is a form of prophecy.⁴

What distinguishes the emphases and answers to these questions from contemporary discussions of authenticity is the teleological moral framework in which they are posed. In other words, medieval Jewish discussions of authentic eating presuppose a theistic worldview in which human beings were created for a certain purpose, and ‘the good life’ is the means by which we realize what we are in potential and perfect ourselves to conform to the end for which we were created. Eating has a moral value, and is good or bad, authentic or inauthentic only to the extent that it contributes to the perfection of our character and purpose as human beings. Medieval Jewish philosophical and mystical thought would define this purpose as knowing and serving God. This is to be opposed to a philosophical perspective which Alasdair MacIntyre calls ‘emotivism,’

the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expression of personal preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral and evaluative in character.⁵

This perspective characterizes most modern and post-modern thinking, including much of the present discussion of authenticity in food and cookery. In this view, there are no real

² Brumberg-Kraus (1999), p. 237.

³ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, p. 483.

⁴ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, p. 482. Brumberg-Kraus (2001), p. 7.

⁵ MacIntyre, p. 11.

objective criteria for judging whether a dish or cuisine is ‘authentic’ or not; it is ultimately an individual’s subjective matter of taste. In contrast, the teleological perspective of medieval philosophy and theology informs its consideration of gastronomy, so that authentic, ‘real eating,’ is an evaluation based on ‘objective’ external criteria. So for our Jewish medieval sources on gastronomy, MacIntyre’s paraphrase of the famous saying is literally true and particularly apt: ‘de gustibus *est* disputandum.’⁶ That is, *akhilah vada’it*, ‘real eating,’ more closely approximates the purpose for which human beings were created – as revealed in Scripture and Aristotelian philosophy – than less authentic, less ‘real’ forms of eating.

In this paper I will focus on one particular medieval Jewish source which develops the idea of *akhilah vada’it*, and integrates it into a full-blown program of Jewish meal ethics, namely, the short treatise *Shulhan Shel Arba* (‘Table of Four’) by Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher ben Hlava, the Spanish kabbalist and Biblical commentator. In this thirteenth century work on eating, Rabbenu Bahya develops the rabbinic idea that the revelation of the Torah on Sinai was ‘*akhilah vada’it*’ - ‘real eating’ - following a creative interpretation of the verse describing the Israelite elders’ experience of divine revelation: ‘They envisioned God and they ate and drank’ (Ex.24:11). R. Bahya seems to consider the Israelites’ past eating of manna in the wilderness and the future promised messianic banquet on the flesh of Leviathan analogous, and consequently more ‘real’ (‘authentic’) than eating beef, fowl, or bread ordinarily set before one at the dinner table in the present. But ‘authentic eating’ for R. Bahya is not a purely spiritual experience. Rather, physical eating combined with mindful talk about it so heightens the experience that one ‘sees God.’⁷ Saying the right words of Torah about the

⁶ MacIntyre, p. 177.

⁷ Brumberg-Kraus, (2001), p. 5.

table while one is dining at the table with other scholars learned in Torah and kabbalah effects an experience of ‘real eating,’ that is, a prophetic vision of God, analogous to the experience of the past revelation to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai and the future enjoyment of the light of the Divine Presence at the eschatological banquet for the righteous in the world to come.

The crux of R. Bahya’s theory of eating is that the soul’s intellectual process of conception is somehow analogous to the body’s physical process of digestion. Both the soul and the body ‘eat’ and are nourished by the spiritual or physical ‘food’ appropriate to their respective natures. Cognition, that is, knowing something by means of one’s act of thought, *is itself a kind of eating* – ‘real eating.’ R. Bahya’s distinctive interpretation however is that while one can distinguish conceptually between nourishment of the body and nourishment of the soul, the way it actually occurs is a *fusion* of the soul’s ‘eating’ by means of thought, and the body’s physical eating. As R. Bahya himself puts it,

the limbs of the body which are the vessel of the soul receive power and strength from the meal, and the soul is stimulated in its powers themselves and strengthens them from this thought, and possibly even the holy spirit descends upon [the eater] at the very moment of eating when this thought arises, and his body is clothed in the thought of his soul – *and the two of them together are as good as one* and fit for the Shekhinah to dwell amidst them.⁸

For R. Bahya, fusion, albeit metaphysical, makes the experience of eating more rather than less authentic.

R. Bahya ben Asher’s theory of authentic ‘real eating,’ *akhilah vada’it* appears in *Shulhan Shel Arba*, a book he intended his late thirteenth century Spanish Jewish audience to read at meals while they were actually eating at the dinner table, in order to dignify the meal

⁸ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 495, my emphasis.

with conversations suffused with ‘precious sayings,’ that is, pertinent references to Scripture and rabbinic and kabbalistic interpretations of them. As R. Bahya says in his preface,

My heart lifted me...to write about this in brief in a book, and to include in it ‘precious sayings,’ so that it be in the hand of any person on his table, that he should set it down by his right hand, and that it should be with him, and that he read in it all that is required at his meal. And if at the time one is eating, he merits the drawing of his inclination to what is in this book of mine, and according to its words, he is sure to be at the level of the pious ones who are perfect in their qualities, who wage the war of HaShem, and oppose all their desires.⁹

No doubt R. Bahya had in mind the famous rabbinic saying from the Mishnah Avot 3:3

(compiled in the third century CE):

If three have eaten at one table and have spoken over it words of the Torah, it is as if they had eaten from the table of God, for it is written (Ezekiel 41.22) ‘He said to me, ‘This is the table which is before the LORD.’¹⁰

R. Bahya’s transformation of a descriptive statement in the rabbinic tradition (‘if three have eaten at one table and have spoken over it words of the Torah, it is as if...’) to a prescription that one *ought to* recite words of Torah about the table over the table, is typical of the Jewish genre of *hanhagot* literature, manuals of practice, which originated in medieval Spain and Provence, and to which *Shulhan Shel Arba* belongs.¹¹

⁹ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 460.

¹⁰ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 474 (a reference to m. Avot 3:3); p. 457 (the first words of the book quoting Ez.41:22); p. 513 (a paraphrase of Ez. 41:22 in the book’s last paragraph): And now this book is finished, based on precious sayings...by which we have raised the ‘table which’ will be called ‘before the Lord.’

¹¹ Ze’ev Gries (1989), p. 18-22; Brumberg-Kraus, (2001), p. 1. See Jack Goody, pp. 143-5, for a sociological interpretation of the emergence of manuals of etiquette in the medieval period.

I do not wish to say too much here about the historical context in which R. Bahya wrote *Shulhan Shel Arba* since that would exceed the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say what I have said in more detail elsewhere, that *Shulhan Shel Arba*, and indeed R. Bahya's particular discussion of *akhilah vada'it* in it, reflects many of the important cultural trends of 13th-14th century Spanish Jewish life: adaptation of Muslim literary forms and philosophical ideas, the emergence of Kabbalah as a distinctive stream of Jewish mysticism - for example, the composition and dissemination of the *Zohar*, the anti-Maimonidean controversy, class tensions between Jewish elites and the Jewish masses, strategies of Jewish acculturation to the surrounding Christian society of Northern Spain during the period of the Reconquista, and an increasingly aggressive effort on the part of the Church to proselytize the Jews of Spain that culminated in the disputations of Barcelona and Tortosa, and finally the expulsion in 1492.¹² We can also infer that medieval culinary culture in general, and that among the Jews in Northern Spain in particular was part of R. Bahya's cultural assumptions, though he is characteristically vague when referring to the dishes served at the table.¹³ R. Bahya's language stressing the inseparability and fusion of body and soul is probably a response especially to a development in thirteenth century Christian theology and practice emphasizing the incarnation of Christ, the movement which Caroline Walker Bynum masterfully charts in

¹² Brumberg-Kraus (1999), p. 227, 257-62.

¹³ Particularly relevant for understanding R. Bahya's medieval Spanish Jewish food culture are Gitlitz and Davidson; Assis, pp. 224-8, 282-3; Cooper; van Gelder; Rodinson and Arberry, *Al-Ghazali on the Manners Relating to Eating*; Roden; Montanari (1994); the relevant essays in Flandrin, Montanari and Sonnenfeld; and Goody (1982), pp. 127-133.

Holy Feast, Holy Fast, though she draws few of her examples from Spain.¹⁴ The eating rituals R. Bahya prescribes are an expression of what Ivan Marcus calls ‘inward acculturation,’ that is, a strategic response to Christian society in which Jews both maintained an unequivocal Jewish identity [and] sometimes expressed elements of their Jewish religious cultural identity by internalizing and transforming various genres, motifs, terms, institutions, or rituals of the majority culture in a polemical, parodic, or neutralized manner.¹⁵

Bynum’s remarks on medieval Christian cultural assumptions about food are particularly suggestive in this light:

Medieval cookbooks make it clear that visual effects were more important to a medieval diner than taste...Given such assumptions about and expectations of food, it is small wonder that medieval mystics considered sounds and sights as crucial to the eucharistic banquet as eating, or that sometimes they felt they ‘ate’ or ‘received’ with their eyes or in their minds and hearts.¹⁶

Such attitudes which emphasized the visual over the taste experience not only affected Christian Eucharistic practice, theologies of transubstantiation, and ecstatic visionary experiences of Christ in the Eucharist, especially among women mystics,¹⁷ but also probably influenced R. Bahya’s theory of ‘real eating.’ But instead of the Eucharistic rituals in which Christian women saw and thus ‘tasted’ *Christ* – the central symbol of Christian culture, R. Bahya proposes an alternative, almost parodic system of eating rituals in which learned Jewish males through ‘real eating’ could embody ‘the Word’ of their Torah and thus ‘envision God and eat and drink’ (Ex 24:11).¹⁸

¹⁴ Bynum (1987,1991); Brumberg-Kraus (1999), p. 262.

¹⁵ Marcus, pp. 11-12, though referring to Jews in medieval Northern Europe, not Spain.

¹⁶ Bynum (1987), pp. 60-1.

¹⁷ Bynum, (1987), pp. 51, 60, 230.

¹⁸ This is my conclusion, Brumberg-Kraus (1999), p. 262, but here applied to R. Bahya’s interpretation of the term ‘real eating’ rather ‘the torah of beast and fowl.’

Moreover, though R. Bahya adopted the term *akhilah vada'it* from earlier rabbinic sources, his particular treatment of it in *Shulhan Shel Arba* singles it out as the most important interpretation of the Scriptural verse Ex 24:11: 'They envisioned God and they ate and drank.' In its original contexts in Midrash Rabbah, the tradition attributed to Rabbi Yohanan which refers to *akhilah vada'i* or *akhilah vada'it* is one positive response to the negative presumption that there was something wrong with the Israelite leaders eating and drinking after seeing God. Ex 24:11 itself suggests this when it says, 'Yet He did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they envisioned God and they ate and drank.'¹⁹

The midrashic interpretation of Ex 24:11 in Leviticus Rabbah 20:10 states:

'Against the leaders of the Israelites' – Said Rabbi Pinchas, From here it suggests they ought to have had His hand raised against them, because as Rabbi Yehoshua said, Were cakes taken up with them on Mt. Sinai, when it says 'they beheld God'? On the contrary, it teaches that they feasted their eyes on the Shekhinah. 'They beheld God' like a person staring at his friend in the midst of eating and drinking. But Rabbi Yohanan said it was real eating [*akhilah vada'i*], as it is said, 'In the light of the King's face there is life' (Pr 16:15). But Rabbi Tanhuma said, it teaches that it was with an abandonment of their minds and a coarseness of their hearts that they feasted their eyes on the Shekhinah.

R. Yohanan insists that what happened was real eating because they *really were* fed by light coming off the face of God, and that it was good thing to feast on the splendor of the Shekhinah. But Rabbi Tanhuma counters that it was an act of vulgarity and disrespect to have 'glutted' their eyes on the Divine Presence, as one modern interpreter translates the Hebrew word *zanu* in this expression.²⁰ R. Yohanan's saying about *akhilah vadi'it* may be an expression of a mystical tradition which employed eating and food metaphors for visionary

¹⁹ *Leviticus Rabbah* 20:10; par. *Numbers Rabbah* 2:25 and see also *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 26.9; *Midrash Tanhuma Aharei* 6; *Midrash Tanhuma (Buber)* 7, and the discussion of these traditions in Hecker, p. 42-46.

²⁰ Hecker, p. 46.

experiences that was already current in the rabbinic era.²¹ But R. Bahya's positive interpretation of *akhilah vada'it* as a mystical way of seeing God is probably much more dependent on the ideas about 'physical nourishment through mystical experience' developed in the *Zohar*, the central mystical text which emerged from the circle of kabbalists in Northern Spain of which R. Bahya was a member, and among the first writers to quote it, in his commentary on the Torah.²² According to the *Zohar*, Ex 24:11 is intended to praise the leaders of the Israelites:

Rabbi Yosi said this is a way of praising them, as it is written, 'they ate and drank,' that is, their eyes were nourished by His light. Rabbi Judah said it was real eating [*akhilah vada'it*], they ate and were nourished from it, that is, they were joined to the upper [heavenly light].²³

R. Bahya follows the *Zohar* in understanding *akhilah vada'it* as a kind of revelation of God, occurring during a meal, which effects a certain conception of God in the participants that raises their status to that of the angels in heaven. It should be clear at this point that R. Bahya's criteria for authenticity are quite literary, based on Scriptural precedents like the

²¹ Chernus, pp. 74-87.

²² Hecker, pp. 82-3, and see pp. 84-90, esp. p. 88, for a discussion of these ideas, nearly all which are echoed in R. Bahya's discussion of *akhilah vada'it* in the Second Gate of *Shulhan Shel Arba*, and p.148 for R. Bahya's relationship to the *Zohar*. Hecker, pp. 82-3, quotes and discusses R. Bahya's reference to *akhilah vada'it* in *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 492, to suggest that while R. Bahya and the *Zohar* share ideas about 'idealized foods' like the manna, the splendor of the Shekhinah, the meals of angels, Bahya's view is much more 'intellectualist, spiritualizing, and ascetic' than the *Zohar*'s and other kabbalists from its circle. However, I am arguing that R. Bahya advocates a fusion of physical and spiritual eating quite close to what Hecker says is the *Zohar*'s view.

²³ *Zohar* 2:126a.

‘meal’ described in Ex 24:11, and have very little to do with the actual sensory experience of the flavors of specific foods.

That being said, R. Bahya does want his readers to think about *akhilah vada'it* and focus on the specific literary metaphors and Scriptural verses which evoke it in the during the performance of quite specific meal rituals, so that his idea of real eating is not wholly devoid of sensory experience. Perhaps it is just that R. Bahya privileges the senses of hearing and sight over taste in the meals he deems most authentic. He divides his eating manual into four ‘Gates,’ whence the title *Shulhan Shel Arba'* (‘Table of Four’).²⁴ Two are devoted to the specific actions to be performed at the table, and two to the specific topics to be discussed there. This suggests that R. Bahya wants there to be an even balance between the things done (‘*dromena*’) and things said (‘*legomena*’) at the table, to adopt the language of Jane Harrison’s theory of ritual.²⁵ The First and Third Gates prescribe specific meal behaviors. The First Gate is concerned with the blessings and hand-washing rituals rabbinic tradition requires for meals. The Third Gate is concerned with ‘*Derekh Eretz,*’ that is, rabbinic meal etiquette, and is essentially a brief anthology of the traditions about host/guest relations from the minor Talmudic tractates like *Derekh Eretz Zuta* and *Derekh Eretz Rabba*.²⁶ Interwoven between these two is the Second Gate, devoted to a discussion ostensibly about the ‘physiology of eating’ but really the exposition of a mystical kabbalistic theory of eating, and the Fourth Gate, devoted to discussions of the eschatological banquets reserved for the

²⁴ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, p. 461. Actually, this is but one of four explanations R. Bahya gives in his preface for the title of his book.

²⁵ Brumberg-Kraus (2001), p. 3-4.

²⁶ See the Hebrew and English editions of Sperber (1990, 1994).

righteous in the messianic era and in the world to come. All the specific references to the term *akhilah vada'it* appear in the Second Gate in the discussion of the 'mystical secrets' of the nature of eating. However, in this discussion, *akhilah vadai'it* is associated with certain metaphors or images from Biblical and rabbinic literature which recur throughout all of the chapters of the book, like the meal of the Israelite leaders at Mt Sinai in the verse Ex 24:11, the manna in the wilderness, the meals of the heavenly angelic beings, and the eschatological banquets. Moreover, the preface of *Shulhan Shel Arba'* sets up all these examples of real eating in the context of a story of the Fall. There is a hierarchy of beings who are distinguished from one another by their diet:

heavenly beings who dine without any effort on the splendor of the Shekhinah in heaven, and we earthly creatures who have to work hard and sweat for our food. 'The lowest realm is the one limited by physical dimensions. Our food is not like their food. Their food is by conception, by seeing the face of their Maker. Our food is the bread of sorrow and the water of tears, by hard work and effort, for so the King established it for our first father because of his sin.'²⁷

We lower beings are under a decree of judgment sort of like Christian original sin, because of Adam and Eve's sin of eating the forbidden fruit. Our difference from the heavenly beings is a consequence of this sin. This sin not only reduced the physical stature of all humankind, but consequently limited our capacity to eat the diet reserved for those higher beings who have no physical dimensions or measurements, and therefore an infinite capacity to take in the nourishment of the glow of the Shekhinah. However, God in His mercy gave a remedy for this condition, the Torah, at least to a select few, the Jews. In R. Bahya's words,

All of us human beings are stained by sin and our souls are sick. In this our nation is just the same as the rest of the nations; we and they alike are under the decree of Eve. However, we are distinguished by our regimen of the pleasures [*dat sha'ashu'im*] from the nations who err, rebel and sin²⁸

²⁷ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, p. 457.

²⁸ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, pp. 458-9.

In other words, the story of the Fall provides the teleological moral framework for evaluating authentic, ‘real eating.’ We human beings are not presently what we are supposed to be, but we will be when our food *is* like their food, that is, the food of the heavenly beings. And God has provided at least some of us with a means to that end, the Torah, a ‘regimen of pleasures’ that will refine and purify us so that we can realize the purpose for which we were indeed created – to attend and serve God constantly. However this suggests that the Torah-prescribed diet that distinguishes Jews socially from non-Jews is analogous to the diet which distinguishes the upper from lower beings. It is not ‘authentic’ just because it is the eating typical and peculiar to a particular ethnic group, the Jews. R. Bahya has in a sense generalized his distinctive Jewish ethnic foodways as the ‘real eating’ for human beings as such.

III. *Akhilah Vada’it* in *Shulhan Shel Arba*

For R. Bahya four types of meals and the Scriptural and rabbinic traditions about them are the most important examples of ‘real eating:’

1. The meal at Mt. Sinai when the nobility of Israel ‘envisioned God and ate and drank.’²⁹
2. The miraculous meals of the Manna in the Wilderness³⁰
3. The Messianic Banquet at the end of time³¹
4. Rabbinic meals conducted using *Shulhan Shel Arba*

²⁹ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba*, pp. 492-3.

³⁰ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 493.

³¹ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba*, pp. 495-6, 501.

All of these meals stress what Hecker calls the ‘psychosomatic unity’ of the meal experiences,³² though apparently there is some confusion about whether R. Bahya imagines a wholly disembodied, metaphorical banquet at the end of time, or one at which one really eats physically.³³ But to focus on R. Bahya’s ambivalence about the resurrection probably misses his point. I think he says there are both, the messianic banquet which involves physical eating (albeit of highly refined and pure foods), and a ‘meal’ in ‘the world of souls’ after that which is purely intellectual. But he also insists that that there is no way even the wisest among us can conceive of it except by analogy to the physical delight we take in eating or walking in a garden:

However in principle we know by inference through our intellect and through the Torah ‘which makes wise the foolish’, that just as the body enjoys and takes delight (*mitaden*) in a pleasant and fragrant meal, in its measure of bodily delight, so the soul will enjoy and take delight in this upper world, however, its way of taking delight there is not measured like bodily things which have measures and dimensions....Come and see how the way of the Holy One Blessed be He is not the way of flesh and blood. For flesh and blood, an empty vessel can contain something, a full one cannot. But it is not so for the Holy One Blessed be He. The full vessel can contain, the empty one cannot ... insofar as bodily things have measure and dimension, when they are empty they can be filled, but when one fills them, they cannot contain any more since they are already filled to their capacity, and nothing with a capacity can contain something more than its capacity. But among the upper things, the full can contain, since it has no measured capacity. And the world of souls is called ‘Garden of Eden’ (*gan aden*) among the sages, and they called it this by way of an allegory, using the example of how the body takes delight (*mitaden*) in a garden, and so it is written about the Garden of Eden in the land, ‘He set him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it,’ (Gen 2:5) – this heavenly Garden of Eden is the world of souls comparable but in contrast to [the earthly one], and it too is called ‘Garden of Eden’, and it is the reward for doing the *mitzvot* in which the soul takes delight, using the image of the body taking delight in a garden.³⁴

Since R. Bahya addresses an audience that is not yet disembodied nor eating at the end of time, we can infer that he believes that discussion of Jewish traditions of eschatological

³² Hecker, p. 92.

³³ Hecker, p. 108.

³⁴ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, pp. 508-9. The Hebrew *gan aden* (Garden of Eden) and *mitaden* (take delight) are connected by means of a pun.

banquets, whether there is physical ‘eating and drinking’ at them or not, at the dinner table with his book at one’s side, is indeed an embodied, physical, psychosomatic experience of eating and drinking which can potentially turn into ‘real eating.’

R. Bahya explicitly associates present rabbinic meals conducted according to his instructions with the term *akhilah vadai*’it in the final paragraph of the Second Gate of *Shulhan Shel Arba*:

So you find yourself learning that *when a person stands over his table and eats with this thought in mind*, see! this eating is indeed a physical matter and natural activity, but see! it also returns to a higher, intellectual form of worship...And this is the point of *having the right intention at a meal at the table* – that the body be nourished by it and take its bodily portion from the bodily eating, and the soul by this act of thought is filled, fed, and satisfied as if from the choicest parts of **real eating** of the ways of Ha-Shem and His pleasantness, and regarding this it is said, ‘Your table is laid out with rich food.’ (Job 36:16)³⁵

By having diners say Scriptural passages that convey these metaphors *at the table*, R. Bahya encourages what I have called elsewhere a sort of ‘directed free association.’

To summarize, the main components of R. Bahya’s definition of ‘real eating’ are as follows. ‘Real eating’ is some kind of visionary, prophetic experience.³⁶ R. Bahya gives numerous examples and references to this dimension of real eating, especially those connected to the verse that he practically turned into a slogan, ‘They envisioned God and they ate and drank’ (Ex 24:11). But what also seems clear is that real eating is not only cognitive, or just a gastronomic *metaphor* for a visual conception. It is inseparable from the physical experience of eating, a quality of ‘psychosomatic unity.’³⁷ Or as R. Bahya puts it,

³⁵ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 497.

³⁶ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba*, p. 492-3.

³⁷ Hecker, p. 92.

the powers of the soul are not visible and are actualized only through the body. If so, the body is a great necessity for the public revelation of the high degree of the soul and its perfection.³⁸

This psychosomatic unity is then described in images drawn from the burnt offering sacrifices as analogies to normal human digestion.³⁹ That being said, the physical component of 'real eating' consists of a relatively ascetic diet.⁴⁰ It is kosher, with particular emphasis on not eating meat with blood in it, that is, its soul, and as a way of socially differentiating Jews from non-Jews by maintaining a higher, that is more discriminating diet.⁴¹ What R. Bahya and his kabbalistic contemporaries call 'fine' and 'pure' foods are preferable, because they believed them to be better at purifying and refining both the mind and body.⁴² Hecker aptly calls these 'brain foods.'⁴³ It is not clear what actual specific dishes R. Bahya has in mind, besides recommending small poultry over red meat, since he is pretty vague about this. though it seems he understands 'fine' versus. 'coarse' foods as contrast between city and country foods.⁴⁴ Also a vegetarian diet appears to be closer to 'real eating' than meat-eating, though Torah sages learned in both the rules of kashrut and the mystical secrets of

³⁸ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, p. 492.

³⁹ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, pp. 491-2. Hecker, p. 94.says, '[R. Bahya's contemporary] Moses De Leon's model of spiritual digestion follows directly from his understanding of the physiology of digestion.'

⁴⁰ Hecker, p. 83.

⁴¹ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, p. 459, 460, 506.

⁴² Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, pp. 496, 501 and *Pirke Avot* , p. 588.

⁴³ Hecker, p. 108: 'brain foods rather than culinary delights.'

⁴⁴ Bahya ben Asher, *Pirke Avot*, p. 588.

reincarnation involved in meat-eating need not avoid meat.⁴⁵ Presumably R. Bahya does not recommend total abstinence from wine in the ‘real eating’ that may occur when following his eating manual, since *Shulhan Shel Arba* is full of specific instructions about the etiquette of drinking wine and saying blessings for over at the table, though it is clear that it would be wrong to get too intoxicated.⁴⁶ The bottom line is that eating or drinking which tends to reinforce rather than diminish one’s intellectual capacity is closer to ‘real eating. Real eating is purposeful eating. If there is a form of ‘real eating’ at the end of time which is disembodied and purely intellectual,⁴⁷ it can only be inferred and spoken about allegorically from our experiences of physical eating and drinking in the here and now.⁴⁸ Moreover, R. Bahya’s ‘real eating’ is possible in the here and now if one arranges their table talk and conduct properly according his eating manual *Shulhan Shel Arba*. Doing so makes ‘real eating’ a form of worship and service of God, the purpose for which God created all His creatures.⁴⁹

This teleological framework obviously supplies the external ‘objective’ criteria for determining whether eating is ‘real,’ that is authentic. However, I also think R. Bahya’s insistence on the psychosomatic unity of ‘real eating,’ the rich imaginative way he has described it, and provided in *Shulhan Shel Arba* a script for its performance suggests that real eating also has an important social, experiential dimension . Eating and talking about eating

⁴⁵ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba*’, p. 496; Brumberg-Kraus (1999), p. 227.

⁴⁶ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba*’, pp. 493, 492.

⁴⁷ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba*’, p. 506.

⁴⁸ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba*’, pp. 504, 508.

⁴⁹ Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba*’, p. 497.

with one's companions the way he suggests cultivates an experience of the unification of opposites, knowing the one in the many. There is no delight in the soul apart from the vessel of the body, of bodies living in community. It is this same sense of bringing together of all things that General Loewenhielm evokes with his Biblical image from the Book of Psalms in the speech he makes at the banquet in *Babette's Feast*: 'Mercy and Truth have met together. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another.'⁵⁰

We have all been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and short-sightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite...But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite...See! that which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly. For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another!'⁵¹

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⁵⁰ Ps 85:10. Cf. Bahya ben Asher, *Shulhan Shel Arba'*, pp. 508-9.

⁵¹ Dinesen, 'Babette's Feast, ' p. 52.

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