My thanks to Professor Ryan for his gracious invitation, and for providing us with a veritable banquet of ideas. Three things occurred to me as I thought about his talk: food’s centrality in Judaism, its symbolism, and the significance of the body as a vehicle for religious devotion.

The Role of Food in Judaism

First, why does food matter? It seems to matter a lot. One answer is that how we deal with it, talk about it, prepare it, restrict it, offer it or refuse it to others reveal our deepest values and sense of ourselves. So Professor Ryan is right to reject the simple “rationalist” explanations for Jewish food laws, say, that pork prohibitions are about trichinosis.

The first value in Judaism is simple: food is not the enemy, it is something to be grateful for. In our diet-conscious society we can sometimes forget that. Many biblical and rabbinic passages use the metaphor of food in abundance to signal God’s generosity and love. In Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” one of the signs of God’s favor is “he prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies…my cup overflows.” The messianic banquet is promised at the end of days as in the mouth-watering image of Isaiah 25:6 “On this mountain the Lord of Hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines
strained clear,” followed in the next verse by the familiar “he will swallow up death forever, then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces…” Both images are about God as the one who gives life. In one targum, a translation and commentary on the Bible in Aramaic, one of the things God created at the origin of the world was the ox that will be eaten at the messianic banquet at the end of days (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Numbers 11:26).

As Professor Ryan mentions, the Torah is spoken of as food—honey, milk, and wine. Psalm 119:103, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey in my mouth” appears in verses about instructions, ordinances, statutes, precepts, namely—law. Torah is spoken of as milk, our most basic sustainer. “Honey and milk are under your tongue” in Song of Songs 4 is understood as Torah.

The second Jewish value suggests that food has a purpose beyond itself. One argument is that food laws and behavior are continuous with one other. There is some relationship between what and how one eats and what one does. Observing food laws leads to being a more ethical person. Several sayings in rabbinic works suggest the purpose of the dietary laws are to ennoble human beings, for example “Rab said, ‘the commandments were only given to purify humankind through them. Because what does the Holy One, Blessed be He, care, if one slaughters from the neck or from the nape?’” (*Genesis Rabbah* 44:1).

In that vein, I would like to think about one of my two favorite sayings from a first-century rabbi, Jesus, “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile” (Mark 7:15). We readers understand it easily, but he has to explain it to his disciples— it is not what a person eats that defiles
him or her, but a person does, evil deeds, pride, slander, murder… As Professor Ryan notes, Mark interprets that as “thus he declared all foods clean,” usually put in parentheses to suggest it is Mark’s addition. So Mark seems to say food laws and behavior have no relationship. It does not matter what one eats, it matters what one does. But what did Jesus mean by the idea “It’s not what goes in that defiles, but what comes out?” Are food laws and behavior continuous or unrelated? Could he have meant that, yes, of course one follows the food laws, but that is not the main point, the main point is ethical behavior?

Even fasts are not for their own sake, but to awaken compassion for those suffering. On Yom Kippur they are often accompanied by synagogue food drives and are always accompanied by a reading from Isaiah 58, which reminds us that God really chooses the fast that results in freeing the captive, sharing one’s bread with the hungry, and taking in the homeless. Early Christians were attracted to fasting and food laws too. The Didache, a very early catechism (late 1st early 2nd century) commands to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. Tertullian the North African father, recommends xerophagy, eating only dry foods (On Fasting 1, 9). The impulse towards discipline around food was still present.

Professor Ryan and I see Paul somewhat differently. I would argue that it is not clear he rejected food laws for Jews, even Jews who believed in Jesus, though no doubt he did for Gentiles. He is angry at Peter for pulling away from eating with Gentiles, but never says what exactly they would be eating. As for Galatians 3:28, that compelling statement that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” this is probably a
baptismal formula which he cites it as a guiding principle. But in practice, Paul did seem to think there were distinctions, say, between male and female. Women were to cover their heads when they pray and prophesy, men were not. Women were to keep silent in the churches. Could he have continued to maintain distinctions between Jews and Gentiles? I hold with a cadre of scholars who now say that he may have retained the idea of the election of Israel, while seeing Gentiles as eligible for entrance into the people of God through Christ. Along those lines, I would not use the word “conversion,” for what happened to him, but rather “call.”

Finally, we have secular versions of food laws that express values. Veganism, vegetarianism, eating foods grown locally, the regulations of snacks and lunches in public schools; all these practices have a moral or philosophical underpinning about our relationship to the natural world and/or responsibility to our children and others. Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma,* about the ethical issues around food production and consumption, has 3 commandments I like for their simplicity. “Eat food, not too much, mostly plants.” He even has his “dominical sayings,” like “the whiter the bread, the sooner you’ll be dead.”

*Food’s Symbolism*

The second issue Professor Ryan has pointed out is that food underscores identity and community. It points to who’s in and who’s out. Association at meals is a statement of friendship. One would never voluntarily eat with someone one dislikes. Meals also shows boundaries. In high school everyone knew where the cool kids sat.
The effect of following food laws can be separation, which can be interpreted as superiority. The biblical Joseph, when he is posing as an Egyptian official, eats separately from his brothers, because supposedly Egyptians did not eat with others, viewing it as an abomination. We saw Paul’s anger at Peter for pulling away from eating with Gentiles, probably because it would imply a lower evaluation of them. In Luke 14:15, the parable of the feast where the invited do not come, servants gather in people from the streets. This seems to be about the banquet at the end-times, and ends with the idea that not everyone will be invited to the party, “none of those who were invited will taste my dinner” (v. 24).

The effect of food laws is to maintain holiness, kedusha, which can also be translated as “separation.” Food laws create tension within the later Jewish community as well. Abraham Geiger, a founder of Reform Judaism in 19th century said, the food laws were “inane, and thereby so very damaging to social life...” One of the arguments against kashrut by early Reform Jews in Germany was that it prevented Jews from being fully integrated into the communities they lived in. As noted, there is more sympathy for them today in Reform circles.

Food underscores identity. Pork seems particularly symbolic. Some Jews who do not keep kosher nevertheless abstain from pork, because of all the historical baggage around it. Forcing Jews to eat pork was a way to ferret out secret Jews in the Spanish Inquisition. Conversos or New Christians who refused pork were suspected of secretly practicing Judaism. In 2 Maccabees 7, the mother and her 7 sons are tortured when they refuse the king’s order to eat pork, and become martyrs for the nation.
Meals were the site of learning in ancient world, as with the Greek symposium, the Passover meal, or Jesus’ teaching at table. Whom Jesus ate with was very significant to others; at times they were tax-collectors and sinners, at other times Pharisees. Could his eating with the Twelve have been reminiscent of the messianic banquet, when the 12 tribes of Israel would be restored? He seems to eat regularly with his friends, Mary and Martha of Bethany, and their brother Lazarus. An interesting passage appears in Luke 10:38-42. The women are doing different things. One, Martha, is caught up in activity (which most assume to be meal preparation), and the other is sitting at Jesus’ feet in the attitude of a disciple, listening to his preaching. The latter, Mary, is privileged as having “chosen the good part” in choosing to be taught by Jesus, but both things are necessary. And the word for what Martha is doing, serving, is diakonia (from which our English word “deacon” comes), which can mean serving food, but can also mean ministry. It made me wonder, if in an early itinerant movement, serving food and ministry were not so far apart. Mary Magdalene and other women are mentioned at the end of Mark as having “followed Jesus and ministered to him when he was in Galilee (15:40-41).” In a group of itinerant preachers like Jesus and the 12 who make up his inner circle, who fed them on their travels?

This brings me to another point in the issue of community, namely the unspoken role of women embedded in the references to preparation and serving of food. I have already brought up the women ministers to Jesus. Ancient hospitality was a fundamental obligation, and could mean life or death. One of the primary roles of the ancient synagogue, was to feed and house travelers. In any case, it seems probable that women played a role in keeping Jesus’ movement afloat. Notable is the case of Peter’s mother-in-
law, who is healed from a fever by Jesus, then immediately gets up to start serving them (Mark 1:29-39). We all know women like that.

Judith Hauptman discusses women in the rabbinic literature and sees evidence of women as expert and trusted in matters of food and preparation. The *haverim*, a group within rabbinism who were extra-scrupulous about matters of ritual purity in food, show no evidence of supervising their wives or doing it themselves, or having ritual experts hovering around the community. A mishnah describes the duties of a man coming into his house right before Sabbath falls, “There are 3 things a man is required to say in his home on Sabbath eve as darkness falls, ‘Have you taken care of the tithe?’ ‘Have you taken care of the eruv,’ and ‘Light the candle’ (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 2:7).”

The assumption in the mishnah is that the wife is capable and knowledgable in performing these activities. The *eruv* is a legal conceit, in this case probably a marker of some kind, that turns a public space into a private space. One makes use of it by carrying food to a central house and putting the food in the communal oven. By everyone doing this, it becomes a private space and one is allowed to carry food back and forth on the Sabbath. Everyone is keeping their food in one central place to keep it warm or cool. Note the element of trust undergirding that law. One assumes the women know what they are doing in these very particular matters of food preparations, but also that everyone trusts their neighbors that they will not bring food to the communal oven that is ritually impure, or even worse, unkosher. Food and its handling reveal borders and the assumptions that make up a community.

*The Body as Vehicle of Religious Devotion*
My last point is brief. Professor Ryan made me think about was the significance of the body as the site of devotion. Contemporary critical study, thanks to Foucault and others, has promoted a strong sense of “my body, my self,” considering the relation of the body and its control to politics, economics and religion. Much contemporary theology focuses on a theology of the body. Discussions of disability, childbirth and breast-feeding as religious metaphors, dress as religious practice, and the like, all fall into this category.

In the Hebrew Bible at least, there is no Cartesian split between mind and body. Nefesh is often translated “soul,” but means “self” or “person.” Psalm 35:10 says “all my limbs shall say, ‘Who is like you, O Lord?’” meaning the whole self is involved in worship. Paul, when he counsels against sexual misconduct in 1 Cor 10, says “all things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial,” then follows with the analogy of the body, the Body of Christ.

Food is essential to the body. It makes it what it is. Like its donor, God, it gives life. (In Jewish law, one of the things one cannot do in the presence of a met, corpse, is eat, because that is somehow disrespectful or shaming to the dead person, who can no longer enjoy this part of life.) Kashrut simply forces one to pay attention for a minute, investing the daily, mundane acts of food preparation and eating with brief reference to God. I would like to end with a quote from Deuteronomy 30: 11-14, that applies especially well to the food laws, and shows the fusion of law and love, rooted in the everyday—

“Surely this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us so that we may hear and observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say,
“Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it? No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”

NOTES


