

WE EAT FIRST

A Congregational Snapshot

ELLEN LIPPMANN AND TRISHA ARLIN

Kolot Chayeinu, a seventeen-year-old independent progressive congregation, was founded on an understanding of the role food can play in establishing community, based on ancient Jewish table fellowships and modern Jewish cafeterias. At Kolot Chayeinu we eat together at every opportunity, tapping into the deep roots of Jewish connection and identity. Food is memory, ritual, and welcoming, an invitation to and a binder of community, and it has been so since our congregation's inception.

B'reishit: The Beginning

Rabbi Ellen Lippmann arrived in New York City in 1979, returning to the place of her parents' birth, in awe of the panoply of Jewish possibilities. Soon after, she had a lunch at the Garden Cafeteria, one of the last Lower East Side Jewish cafeterias, with its bland, overcooked vegetables, brown bread, and the liveliest conversation among and between tables that she'd ever experienced. We would never put up with that food any more, but she was drawn to the passionate need for talk. The Garden Cafeteria became the shul-café

of her dreams. Rabbi Lippmann started Kolot Chayeinu with that dream in mind, cognizant of what happens in shuls, where even the dullest davening turns into a buzz of enthusiasm with the beginning of the *Oneg Shabbat* or the *Kiddush*. “Why not flip the order?” she asked. “Why not eat first, and bring that buzz into the prayer or study?” And so we do.

Shacharit: Breakfast

The food arrives first. Bags, backpacks, shopping carts come through the door, filled with bagels or matzah, cream cheese, tofu, hummus, and anything else this week’s breakfast bringer craves: donuts, gluten-free rice crackers, yogurt, fruit, kugel, juice, and always, coffee. It looks delicious as it is arranged on the kitchen table in baskets and on plates. Each person arriving stops to “oohh” and “aaahh” as we gather in a circle, hold hands, and sing the ancient blessing: . . . *hamotzi lechem min haaretz*. The words seem to bring others, and soon the room is filled with faces and voices and smiles and laughter and sometimes, even tears. Shabbat has begun at Kolot Chayeinu. Kolot is a Shabbat morning community at heart, and breakfast is the entry point, the way in, the transition from home and street to prayer and community.

When we eat a Kolot breakfast before prayer, when we share our food and our morning selves with each other, we remember who this community is and why we are there, that we are linked to the people in the room as *chaverim*, friends, fellow travelers, and that we can connect to God more easily with them than without them.

It is a kind of kashrut, this way of eating. Not rule-bound, exactly, but we have our set rituals and new ones; it is all a way to connect to the holy through food. *Kasher*, in addition to being related to the restrictions about eating, also means “right, proper, well-joined.”¹ We are well-joined, indeed, when blessing and food and people and place all come together.

The congregation hears the same introduction to the *Motzi* before every meal. We join together, everyone touching someone who is eventually touching the bagel or the challah. The rabbi evokes the power of eating together to bridge separations between people and speaks of the chain of creation that led to this moment, from God to the seed to the earth to the farmer, from harvest to milling to baking to distribution to retail to the Kolot volunteer who purchased the challah and brought it to shul so we could stand there to thank God for this bread of the earth. Every time the rabbi does this, the regulars laugh. They know the lines of the story so well that sometimes they say it with her, almost word for word. Some occasionally chafe at the sameness but recognize it as a genuine ritual, as much a part of who we are as the traditional blessing for food. We are linked by touch and blessing, intertwined like that challah as we give thanks to God. This food and the rabbi's words introduce and normalize God's presence in our community as much and maybe more than any prayer.

The food, the gathering, the honest talk fill a deep need, offering relaxation, nurturing, pleasure, and contentment to those who arrive in time to partake. It is the Pesach seder, the rebbe's *tisch*, the family table, and *Mah Tov* rolled into one. *Mah tovu obalecha, Yaakov*: How good is this tent of meeting. Is this what our ancestors meant when they called God *HaMakom*—a place where everything comes together?²

A few months ago, a congregant, speaking with Modern Orthodox friends, mentioned that Kolot Chayeinu eats before services but not always afterwards. They laughed and all but patted her on the head, as if to say, what a cute and wacky shul. She later reported that she wanted to tell them, yes, well, maybe we're a little wacky, but that's not how it feels. It feels like a great big hug, the kind you get when a family has invited you into their home. Come on in, you look hungry, eat, then we'll talk, we'll pray, we'll find fellowship.

Every *b'rachah* is a moment of stopped time, a mini-Shabbat when we separate the holy from the mundane. A meal is like that as well. We stop, we sit, we connect. The rituals of eating and praying together are parallel, with a beginning, middle, and end, repetition,

group participation, private moments, high points, calm conclusions, and formal closings.

Once that food-fueled connection is made and true conversation begun, real prayer can follow. *Modeb ani l'fanecha*: How grateful we are for this day, for this gathering, for the gift of awakening to the day. Every time we say *Baruch atab* . . . and give thanks for food or drink, we leave our narrow selves and become part of an expansive community. We are reminding ourselves to pay attention to the world with its small and large moments for which we can be grateful. We are saying, “We are in this together.” We are leaning back into God³ as we rest from the hard day or week, the pain we suffer, the yearnings we hold deep. We encourage humility and open-heartedness. These blessings we say or sing before or after eating hold centuries of wisdom and experience, eons of struggle and triumph, years of simple joys.

Minchah: Lunch

After services we make *Kiddush* together at Kolot Chayeinu and often have lunch as well. Here too the talk flows—reflection on the service, the *d'rash*, the Torah reading, the news of the day or of someone's illness or joy. Again, the ritual, the drink, the food in hand offers transition, connection, contentment: *V'shamru v'nei Yisrael et haShabbat*.⁴ How did God mean us to celebrate Shabbat if not with rest and joy and gratitude and food—bread or cake or hummus and pita on a table, a glass of wine or juice in the hand? How else would we Jews celebrate? How can a Jewish community teach that kind of gratitude without living it?

Once a month or so we have a Shabbat Café: lunch and learning, the place where food and “Torah”—authors, community concerns, national issues, prayer—come together. We are reminded of the midrash in which Shimon bar Yochai teaches his students that Torah is something to be consumed, not only read with eyes and mind, but also taken in as nurture and, we would add, nutrient.⁵

Maariv: Dinner

Surprisingly, Kolot Chayeinu rarely has Shabbat dinner together. Years ago, though, there was a monthly vegetarian potluck followed by a short *Kabbalat Shabbat* service. We were much smaller in number, and it was still possible for us all to sit down together to share a full Shabbat dinner. We often had first-time visitors, people who were either dipping their secular toes into Judaism for the first time or who had fled from the sexist and unimaginative temples of their youth and were now looking for a way back in that fit with who they had become. At dinner they'd find themselves munching on pasta salad and lentils, and somehow the eating let them see the rabbi as an actual human being who laughed and asked questions while passing the seltzer. For many, it was the "mundane" act of eating together that actually moved them from cynical distance to deep engagement in the Jewish community and practice.

HaAtid Lavo: What's Next?

Kolot Chayeinu began as a kind of *chavurah*, albeit with a rabbi. We have grown from eight founders to more than 315 adult members and 200 kids. Questions of community have arisen at every stage of growth: How can people still get to know each other when there are more members and more natural groupings by affinity? How do we cross those boundaries? We meet in rented space and have no office, so food and the Internet are our places of connection. We thought that we would have a café, a place for nonformal learning, art, guided and spontaneous conversation, and more. We are not there, yet we maintain that dream and eat together at every opportunity. Parents provide food for children's classes, based on nutrition guidelines from teachers. Committees and task forces meet in homes, always with at least a little nosh. The annual congregational meeting starts with supper. Staff meets around food, and so does the board, finding the in-person

connection of sharing a meal a needed alternative to e-mail and phone conversation.

Recently, new issues have arisen. The gluten-free have begun to rebel against the steady diet of bagels at breakfast. A resident food expert has taken over Shabbat lunch, insisting on a wide variety of vegetarian foods from all the cuisines of Brooklyn. He is also suggesting that we resist soft drinks in favor of good New York City tap water, conceding that if we yearn for carbonation, we should invest in our own seltzer machine. And plans are afoot for a food page on our new website. Perhaps it will include shared recipes, discussions between the vegans and meat eaters, thoughts about the eco-kosher movement, Uri L'Tzedek or Tav Chavrati.

Some members insist on chicken for a communal Shabbat dinner, saying, "It isn't Shabbat without chicken!" Others are vegan, urging us all to give up meat, eggs, and even dairy. Others want us to avoid processed food. Some keep eco-kosher, insisting that if there is chicken, it should be kosher, but it should also be free-range and organic. Each person is passionate and adamant about his or her opinion, sure that if the rest would only see the light, the right decision would be made. And so, we balance: our occasional communal Shabbat dinners have both a kosher (and if we can, free-range and organic) chicken buffet table and a vegetarian table, and preregistrations indicate a nearly even split between them.

After one recent Kabbalat Shabbat service, a series of meetings about an important (though possibly not so interesting) congregational topic were announced. Afterwards there was a thoughtful, less than enthusiastic pause. Then the announcer said, "Oh, and there will be food." We all smiled and laughed, and then and there, many of us decided to go to the meeting. Why not? At Kolot Chayeinu we eat first. And it works.

NOTES

1. Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud* (Jerusalem: Harov Publishing, n.d.), 677.

2. We love this phrasing by Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer.
3. Thanks to Linda Thal for giving us this language as she received it from Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man.
4. From the Sabbath liturgy. Literally, “The Children of Israel shall guard the Sabbath” (Exod. 31:16).
5. From the *M'chilta* of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai to Exodus 13:17.