

Rabbi Rick Kellner
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Our Bodies Are Temples, Not Trashcans

I hold in my hand a squash. Let's not be confused, this is not a beach ball. I am not going to give a sermon to it, I am not going to have a siesta with it and I am not going to dress it up like Cantor Kent, but I am going to talk about it.¹ "Is the squash a vegetable?" What do you think? How many of you think it is a fruit? Well, this was the question that started a recent lunch conversation between the temple's senior staff. You can imagine the depth of the conversation that ensued. Well it's a fruit...no it is definitely a vegetable...but it has seeds, it must be a fruit." Then as everyone does when we have a dispute and are not in the presence of a computer, we took out our Droids or iPhones and went to the ultimate authority, wikipedia. Sure enough we found confirmation of our dispute that the squash, like the tomato, pumpkin, cucumber, and pepper is a fruit because of its seeds.

So here I am, standing here on Yom Kippur talking about food. Yes, I know we are sitting here today as a community, fasting. What's the one thing the rabbi shouldn't talk about on a day of fasting, it's food. I guess you'll have to forgive me; after all it is Yom Kippur. But we are breaking convention, and we are going to think about food today. Why? Because as Americans, we have to eat better. We have to eat healthier. Why? Because, our bodies are a gift. They are a gift from God and they are irreplaceable. You know the best birthday present I ever received, it wasn't the video game system or the new car. It was the gift that I was given the day I was born. That gift was me. I have learned many things during my life but perhaps the hardest thing I have had to learn was how precious this body is and how it is the only body I will get and if I destroy it, it will be gone and I will be gone forever.

Philo Judaeus was an ancient philosopher who lived more than two thousand year's ago. He looked at the body in such a special way. "The body is the soul's house. Therefore shouldn't we take care of our house so that it does not fall into ruin?" If you think about Philo's teaching, he understood that we always take care of our house because we live inside it. When there is a leaky roof, we take care of it. When the air conditioner breaks, we take

¹ References to the beach ball refer to Rabbi Klein's sermon on Rosh Hashanah

care of it. When the refrigerator breaks, we take care of it. If we do those things for the physical structure that is our house, we should also do them for the physical structure that is our bodies. Our bodies are like temples, they are not trashcans. What is inside them is so precious and we should treat them in precious ways. Philo is teaching us that we have to take care of our bodies; we have to treat them with respect, just like we do with our house and with our temple.

Last week on Rosh Hashanah we heard Rabbi Klein speak about making decisions for the future. This past year I made such a decision. I was faced with a great challenge in my life; I had to “get healthy.” You see my New York roots; have caused me to love pizza, and bagels, and to enjoy the wonders of eating exotic foods. I love fried foods, but at the same time such foods are probably not the healthiest thing one could consume. I was faced with a decision, do I continue down this path of eating unhealthy or do I change course and forge a new path, one that would be more challenging. I was faced with a decision, do I want to eat pizza, hamburgers and greasy foods my whole life or do I want to be alive to see my daughter get married and to enjoy the blessing of being a grandfather? When it comes down to it, this was a pretty easy decision. The joy of my daughter getting married and having children far outweighs any meal I could possibly eat. And so I did a mitzvah, I started taking care of my body. I lost weight, I became healthy. It was not an easy journey and it will not be an easy journey from today on, but it was one I had to take.

I am not alone on this journey to healthfulness. I feel supported knowing that there is an entire movement behind me. This movement is about establishing a healthy home for your family. It is a movement that goes all the way to the top and is supported by America’s first mom, Michelle Obama. This past winter the first lady started a new campaign that would help solve America’s epidemic of childhood obesity. Calling the issue "one of the most serious threats to a child’s future," The first lady noted that childhood-obesity rates have tripled in the past three decades, and that the excess weight kids are carrying these days increases the risk of developing diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, and asthma. Michelle Obama said, she had "great concern" that too many of today's kids were on track to live shorter and less healthy lives than their parents, even though the problem is "so imminently solvable."

"This isn't like a disease where we're still waiting for the cure to be discovered, we know the cure for this," Obama told an audience packed into the White House's State

Dining Room. "This isn't like putting a man on the moon or inventing the Internet—it doesn't take some stroke of genius or feat of technology. We have everything we need, right now, to help our kids lead healthy lives ... so let's move to solve it."²

“Let’s Move” is such a great name for this campaign, the first lady is saying let’s move to solve this problem and she is also saying, let’s move, let’s get up and exercise. Let’s spend more time doing physical activity that will help us get healthy.

You know let’s move is not some modern thought or ideology. It has roots in Jewish thought from a Jewish thinker more than seven hundred years ago. Maimonides is one of the most famous Jewish thinkers of all time, he lived in the 13th century and he was also a doctor. He taught, “If we lead a sedentary life and do not take time to exercise, we will throughout our lives be subject to aches and pains and our strength will fail us.” Maimonides’ comment here reminds us that taking care of our bodies and ensuring our own health becomes a mitzvah. It becomes a sacred obligation in which we realize our bodies are gifts from God and we take care of them so that we may live.

Being healthy is more than just taking care of ourselves. It is about making sure that students and those who are less fortunate have healthy options as well. It is making sure that we put a stop to food deserts. Let’s think about this for a second. Raise your hand if you like to eat hamburgers, steak, pizza, spaghetti and meatballs. Now keep them up if you would prefer to eat a good healthy salad, or some fresh cooked vegetables. We see fewer hands and less kids’ hands.

Let’s look to a story about a kid like you: Danny is a 10th grader at a Southern California HS.³ He goes to school in a food desert. Located less than 300 feet from the doors to the school is a McDonald’s restaurant. Danny loves to eat burgers, fries and a drink called “The Hulk” a sugary drink that mixes Orange Hi-C and blue PowerAde. But not too worry, Danny has stopped eating Big Macs because he thinks there are too many calories. You see when Danny exits the front doors of his High School, he is faced with a really difficult decision for lunch or an afterschool snack: Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, Burger King or McDonald’s. Which would you choose?

² <http://www.newsweek.com/blogs/the-human-condition/2010/02/09/michelle-obama-s-childhood-obesity-plan-reaching-out-to-america-s-moms.html>

³ Super-sizing the student body; Obesity is significantly more common at schools within easy walking distance of fast-food restaurants. Jerry Hirsch, Los Angeles Times. March 23, 2009

Think about what happens when these restaurants are located less than 530 feet from the schools. More and more kids eat unhealthy food. A study that was conducted over 8 years and surveyed 1 million of California's 9th graders found that kids were 5% more likely to be obese when these restaurants were a little more than a football field away from the school. These figures have resulted in new laws that have changed restaurants. A one year freeze on building of fast-food restaurants in South LA recently expired, many restaurants now list nutrition information, and Santa Barbara outlawed toys being served inside of Happy Meals. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act currently before congress will reauthorize child nutrition programs The purpose here is to promote healthy eating and to cut down on the increase in America's childhood obesity and heart disease.

Each of us confronts this issue every day. We come home from a long day at work or school, we're tired and we don't have the energy to cook a healthy meal. It's easier to grab the take out menus and the junk food to fill our selves up. We have a difficult choice to make every time we have a snack or a meal. We might not think it is worth the fight with our kids when it comes to snack time, but this is a challenge that we have to face together. Kids, I know how good this food tastes, if you are going to eat a cookie, have a banana, or some carrots instead. When you go for that banana, it connects you to the earth, it connects you to the farmer who picked the banana from the tree, it connects you to the rain that makes it grow, it connects you to life. When you eat that cookie, what does it connect you to? The factory where it was made. Additionally, if you are going to sit at home and play video games, spend some time at the park playing soccer or basketball. Take a walk in your neighborhood. Ride your bike to a friend's house.

We serve food in our religious school at snack on Tuesday afternoons and on Tuesday evenings to our teenagers. Our promise to you from today onward is that there will be healthy choices. This year our 9th graders will be studying about food, from the laws of kashrut to the challenge of putting an end to food deserts. Our own temple member, and food writer for the LA Times, Mary MacVaen has been active in helping us make this transition, we are extremely grateful for her dedication to this issue and for enabling it to take roots within the walls of our temple.

Here are three things you can do to be more aware of the food we are serving in our households: 1) Participate in the Temple's CSA, so you always have fresh fruits and vegetables in your house; 2) work to end food deserts by helping to make sure communities

have access to fresh produce, you can do this by urging members of congress to support the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids act and finally 3) have a little fun with your food, try new and healthy recipes that everyone in the family can enjoy.

Each year in our Torah reading on Yom Kippur we read the same passage. “I set before you life and death, blessing and curse; choose life that you may live and that your descendents may live.” (Deuteronomy 30) This is a great challenge that is presented to us each and every day. How do we choose life when there are so many great temptations out there that could lead us astray? When we think about our lifestyles, when we think about what we eat, when we think about how we exercise, in each decision we make, our lives and our health can hang in the balance. The psalmist wrote that, “Our bodies are wondrously made,” (Psalm 139:14), we often take it for granted but we should have awe and reverence for the finely tuned network, of cells, organs, veins and arteries that keep us alive.

When we are faced with the challenge of keeping ourselves healthy, there is one thing to do, when we are faced with the challenge of bringing healthy eating to our local schools, there is one thing to do, when we are faced with the challenge of serving food to our children there is one thing to do, choose life. Choose life so that we may live. It is that simple, choose life!