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# Eating Together: Planning for Meals, Kiddush, Simchas, and Holidays

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When we eat together, we can connect on many different levels. We connect to the food, and if you have the chance to serve food from a local farm or a producer you know, then the stories of the people and the land that grew the food can be just as nourishing as the food itself. We connect to each other around a table, too; food gives us the chance to have longer conversations with folks we may regularly just see in passing. And we have the chance to learn and celebrate together, in a long chain of Jewish tradition.

Planning communal meals can be complicated by people's busy schedules, institutional kashrut polices, space and time challenges, and so on. The tips in this section will help you navigate some of these challenges and help you create a memorable feast—whether the occasion is simply bringing your community together, giving your weekly kiddush table a sustainable-upgrade, celebrating life-cycle events, or planning for big holidays like Rosh Hashanah and Passover.

## Advance Planning

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There are a number of different questions you want to ask when you're contemplating a communal meal:

- How many people am I expecting? What is the ideal number for achieving my goals (intimate conversation, bringing the whole community together, etc.)? Will this be kid-friendly or geared more towards adults (hint: a 40-min speech by a guest speaker, not so kid-friendly)? Be clear about your expectations to your guests.
- Should we use the institution's kitchen/social hall? (You may wish to explore this option if kashrut is an issue, if you're expecting a lot of guests, or if you don't wish to open up your home.) Other advantages include guests feeling comfortable in a familiar space, access to large-scale kitchen equipment, janitorial staff (though you should confirm that they will be available to help you).
- Or maybe a picnic in a park? The obvious challenge to this option is weather: a park with a covered picnic location is a great way to ensure success regardless of the elements. If you do plan an outdoor event, consider: can everyone find the location? Do you need a permit for a large gathering? Will other activities in the park contribute to or hinder the atmosphere you're trying to create?
- Hosting at home? Great for smaller gatherings and building community. Navigating kashrut concerns can be a challenge - see the note below with some suggestions for helping to make all your guests feel comfortable.

## Sourcing Your Food

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Use the tips in Chapter 1 to help you decide what food to serve. Remember, you may not be able to serve a 100% kosher sustainable meal. Rather, aim to choose elements that really stand out, and make sure that people notice them. Signs on tables or an announcement to point out the local flower centerpieces, the donated chocolate from a sustainable chocolate company, or the seasonal fruits on the fruit platter will start to educate your community about the available options.

### So we can all eat together

Communal meals pose some challenge for folks with strict dietary concerns, whether this is kashrut, allergies, or other food choices. Here are some suggestions to help guests navigate the options with grace:

- Have labels and pens available, and encourage guests to write out ingredient lists to label their dishes. You may wish to have them indicate the kind of kitchen where the food was prepared (kosher, vegetarian, prepared on Shabat, etc.)
- Set aside one table for kosher food, one table for vegetarian food, one table for everything else.
- Have a conversation with your guests ahead of time to find out about special dietary needs. Let them know what you expect to be able to accommodate, and where they may wish to simply bring their own food.

## Planning Moments for Connection

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A good meal has a good start and a good ending. People should feel welcomed and included. They should understand that there is a focus to your meal, and know what that focus is. Here are some suggestions for bringing mindfulness to your meal:

- **Food Blessings:** Jews have been saying blessings over food for over 2000 years. Pausing before a meal to offer thanks can be a profound moment of connection—with the growers, producers, and chefs; with the people around your table; with God and with creation. Jewish food blessings offer an accessible entry point into Jewish tradition, but if the traditional wordings are a challenge, consider inviting people to articulate their own blessings, or offer a *kavanah* (intention) before the meal in addition to saying traditional blessings.
- **Opening Circle:** An opening circle lets people get a sense of who they are going to be eating with. It lets them share a piece of themselves that may not come up in ordinary dinner chit-chat, which helps deepen relationships. It helps to focus the group on a particular question that will be discussed during the evening learning, and it lets everyone be heard. People might already be chatting in small groups, so gently ask for everyone to quiet down. Introduce

yourself and explain what is going to happen first, then pose the question, then indicate a person to start.

- **Learn Some Texts Together:** Later in this chapter, some texts from Food For Thought: Hazon’s Sourcebook on Jews, Food and Contemporary Life have been included to help you think about your relationship to food and Jewish tradition. You may want to use these texts as a conversation starter at a communal meal.

### TIPS FOR HOSTING A SUSTAINABLE MEAL AT YOUR INSTITUTION:

- Pick one part of your meal to source from local food producers, and tell your guests about it (i.e. your dessert course could be all local berries or fruit, or Fair Trade chocolate).
- Buy from companies listed in the Producers Guide, and highlight their company values on menu cards or in a program.
- Serve grass-fed meat. If sustainably-produced meat isn’t available, make your meal vegetarian, and tell your guests why.
- Plan for thoughtfulness: hold an opening circle, set a *kavanah*, have discussion questions prepared for every table, hold a guided food meditation and/or say a grace after meals together.
- Use reusable, recycled, or compostable plates and silverware.

## Hosting a Sustainable Kiddush

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The weekly Shabbat kiddush table is a place of blessing, schmoozing, and *simcha* (happiness). But it also has the tendency to generate a lot of waste and unhealthy eating habits. The list below offers a few resources and ideas for making your kiddush table healthy and sustainable. The same ideas can easily be transferred to your next synagogue social event, Hadassah meeting, book club, or canned food drive.

- **Start a Kiddush Committee at Your Synagogue.** Get together a group of people who like to cook and give your usual caterer

a break. Try offering a “homemade kiddush” once a month where everything is cooked by volunteers and is locally-sourced and organic.

- **Go Free Range.** Egg salad is a staple of the kiddush table. Try making egg salad from cage-free eggs.
- **Veggie Cholent.** Serve vegetarian cholent at your kiddush. Try featuring a new grain like brown rice, barley, or millet.
- **Feature Seasonal Fruits.** Fresh fruit platters are commonly found at kiddush tables and are both beautiful and healthy. But if you live outside of California, it can be next to impossible to source these fruits locally during the winter months. Focus on fresh fruits when they’re in season in your area, and when they’re not, consider dried or canned (if dried and canned locally!).
- **Can the Soda.** Avoid sugary sodas and fruit punches – instead, serve seltzers, 100% real fruit juices (and scotch, of course!). A grape juice to try: if you live in the Northeast, try serving the kosher grape juice from Glendale Farms.
- **Family Style.** Try serving kiddush family style – with the food on small platters on tables, rather than vast quantities at a long buffet. This allows people to see what’s available and encourages them to take healthy portions.
- **Hummus!** Hummus is relatively simple to make fresh in large batches and tastes amazing.
- **The Salatim.** Try serving pickles, dilly beans, or other value-added products from local farms. Invite the farmers to speak to the congregation about their farm during Shabbat lunch.
- **Leftovers.** “If you run out of food, or there is none left by the end of kiddush, then the amounts were perfect,” Edith Stevenson comments. “The idea that we must have LOTS of food at a kiddush is a Jewish tradition that I think is just plain wrong!” If you do have leftovers, consider donating them to a local Food Bank or other food recovery organization. Another option: freeze your leftovers and deliver them to families with a new baby or someone recovering for surgery or illness.

## Sustainable Simchas

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It seems that there is always a reason to celebrate in the Jewish community. While the Jewish calendar is packed with holidays, lifecycle events offer additional opportunities to sing, dance, and eat great food! Use the following tips to ensure that your next simcha reflects your commitment to living a sustainable life. The following suggestions can be applied for any holiday, event, or occasion!

- **Serve a Vegetarian or Vegan Meal.** Serving a vegetarian meal is often healthier and less expensive and certainly more environmentally friendly. If you are serving a dairy meal, look for recommendations on kosher, sustainable dairy products in the Producers Guide. Make your meal even greener by serving local and seasonal produce.
- **Serve Produce that is Grown Locally and in Season.** Connect to the season that your simcha falls in by serving seasonal foods that are grown locally. Often you can save money buying this produce at a farmers market. If you are catering your simcha, ask the caterer where they get their produce. If they don't source from local vendors, ask them if they would make an exception.
- **Serve Meat or Fish that is Sustainable** If you decide to serve meat at your simcha, you will find recommendations for kosher, organic meat in the Producer Guide. Look for fish that is certified as sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council or select "Best choice" or "Good" options from the Seafood Watch pocket guide.
- **L'Chaim!** What would a simcha be without a good L'chaim. You can find recommendations for organic, kosher wines in the Producer Guide. Consider serving beer or alcohol that are brewed or distilled in your area.
- **Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Compost!** Get a clear idea of how many people you will be expecting at your simcha so that you don't purchase unnecessary food. If you have leftover food, think about freezing leftovers, giving it away to your guests, or donating it to a local shelter or emergency food provider. Try to use reusable dishes, cutlery, napkins and table cloths. If you need to use disposables, avoid plastic and look for more sustainable plates and cutlery made of corn, sugar cane, and bamboo. Make sure that

all recyclable products end up in the appropriate recycle bins. Instead of filling landfills, turn the leftover scraps from your simcha into nutrient rich soil by composting! If you don't have your own compost bin, find a friend, farm, or community garden where you can donate your compostable scraps.

## Suggestions for a Healthy and Sustainable Rosh Hashanah

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The holiday of Rosh Hashanah is the perfect time to open up to new possibilities and be grateful for everything you have. It's a time to let the blasts of the shofar shake you awake to the world around you. And more than anything, Rosh Hashanah offers the opportunity for *tshuva* (returning/repentance) – to return to our best, most full versions of ourselves. As we turn inward, we have the chance to ask, "what impact do our actions have on our friends and family, our communities, and on the earth?" Here are some suggestions for a healthy and sustainable Rosh Hashanah:

- **Go Apple Picking!** Find a pick-your-own farm at [pickyourown.org](http://pickyourown.org).
- **Avoid the Honey Bear.** Apples and honey are two of the most recognizable Jewish holiday foods. Meanwhile, the emergence of "colony collapse disorder" (the mass disappearance of bees from hives) indicates that something is awry in the bee community. But the ubiquitous honey bear that sits in most of our cabinets tends to be filled with industrially-produced (and not particularly flavorful) honey. This year, dip your apples in delicious, raw honey produced by a small-scale apiary. Try Bee Raw Honey, Marshall's Honey (raw, kosher) or Tropical Traditions (raw, kosher).
- **Make it Maple.** Hazon's favorite Orthodox maple syrup farmer, Rabbi Shmuel Simenowitz, celebrates the New Year with his family by dipping apples into maple syrup from his own trees. Join him in this sweet twist on traditional apples and honey by switching to maple syrup.
- **Seasonal Centerpieces.** Instead of fresh-cut flowers that will wilt after a few days, create a sustainable centerpiece that will impress your

guests. Place 12 heirloom apples or pomegranates in a glass bowl, or place potted fall flowers (chrysanthemums, zinnias, marigolds, etc.) around the table to add seasonal color.

- **Highlight Local Flavors.** Rosh Hashanah comes at a time of abundant harvest in most parts of the world. Celebrate your local harvest by offering dishes made from your CSA vegetables or from a farmer's market.
- **Celebrate the Non-Local Food.** Pomegranates are an important symbolic food on Rosh Hashanah, but are not necessarily local to most regions in America. Instead of eschewing them entirely, take the moment to recognize why you are including this food and how it fits into your celebration. Ask someone at your dinner table to prepare a few words (like a poem or fact sheet) about pomegranates, or whatever other food you'd like to highlight.
- **Cast Away Cleanup.** Tashlich is one of the most beautiful moments of Rosh Hashanah where we head towards a flowing body of water and toss in bread to symbolically cast away our sins. As part of your Rosh Hashanah preparation, take a day in the week leading up to the holiday (and bring your friends and kids) to "clean up" the river or watershed where you will perform the tashlich ritual. Collect any garbage or bottles lying about and walk around to get a lay of the land. When you come back the next week, note if you feel a different connection to the space.

## Healthy, Sustainable Passover Resources

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Also known as "*Chag Ha-Matzot*" (possibly a holiday celebrating the new barley harvest) and *Chag Ha-Aviv* ("holiday of spring"), Passover is a time to notice and celebrate the coming of spring. The seder plate abounds with seasonal symbols: the roasted lamb bone celebrates lambs born in spring, *karpas* symbolizes the first green sprouts peaking out of the thawed ground, and a roasted egg recalls fertility and rebirth.

Passover offers a perfect opportunity to combine the wisdom of a traditional Jewish holiday with our contemporary desire to live healthily and sustainably in our world. For example, some families put an orange

or olive on their seder plate to recognize women's rights and solidarity with Middle East peace. In the same spirit, we offer these suggestions to help you celebrate the holiday in sustainable style.

### BEFORE PASSOVER

- **Get Rid of Your Chametz – Sustainably.** You don't have to douse your house in poisonous chemicals—noxious to both you and the people who work in the factories that produce them—to get rid of your chametz (bread products and crumbs which are literally, and ritually, cleared before Pesach). Try using natural, non-toxic cleaning products such as Seventh Generation and Ecover.

### SUSTAINABLE SEDER PLATE

- **Every Charoset Tells A Story.** Charoset's mixture of apples and nuts is already healthy and delicious and, when made with local apples and/or nuts, sustainable. Charoset also offers you the chance to explore other cultures within the Jewish Diaspora. Google the word "Charoset" to find recipes from Russia, Spain, Holland, Yemen, Turkey, Surinam... – or ask your guests to bring their own favorite charoset recipe and have a taste-test.
- **Fairly Traded Pecans.** Equal Exchange recently launched a new line of fairly-traded pecans grown by an agricultural co-operative in Southwest Georgia. Infuse your charoset with the taste of justice, or offer as a pre-dinner nibble for hungry Seder guests.
- **Sprout Your Own Karpas.** If you can't find locally grown greens to dip for karpas, sprout your own! Although many sprouts come from corn, soybeans, and other chametz or *kitnyot* (species not eaten on Passover) in just 2-3 days, you can have fresh, delicious quinoa sprouts that you "grew" yourself!
- **Buy and Grate Fresh Horseradish Root for Your Seder Plate.** When it comes time for the Hillel sandwich, hold up an ungrated root so your guests know where that bitter stuff comes from.
- **Free-Range Betza (egg).** Buy organic, free-range eggs and be willing to pay slightly more for them. They taste better, didn't cause suffering to the animals who laid them, and support farmers who are making it possible for you to eat good food.
- **Roast a Beet.** If you're going vegetarian for your

seder (see below), substitute a roasted beet for the roasted lamb shank. Or follow The Jew & The Carrot reader, Sarah Fenner's suggestion: "In place of the shankbone in my home, we have often roasted a 'pascal yam' instead!"

#### THE SEDER TABLE: FOOD & DECORATION

- **Enjoy Your Flowers on Pesach—and All Spring.** Fresh bouquets make beautiful centerpieces, but only last a few days and are often grown with pesticides. Try a sustainable alternative like potted tulips or potted herbs.
- **Bring on the Hors D'oeuvres.** After you bless and eat the karpas, vegetables and dip, fruits, and cheese are all permitted. Save your table from starvation and distraction with a few snacks – everyone will have a better time.
- **Host a Vegetarian or Vegan Seder.** Even if you regularly eat meat, Pesach is a great time to eat lower on the food chain. Think of it as getting rid of your "gastronomical chametz." Menu ideas: almond quinoa salad (quinoa is Kosher for Passover!), matzah lasagna, vegetarian matzah ball soup, roasted new potatoes with rosemary, Israeli salad, borscht, garlic sautéed fiddleheads...
- **Host a Potluck Seder.** Or at least accept offers of help with the preparation. A sustainable seder also means not wearing out the host!
- **Buy Vegetables at Your Farmer's Market.** Go a few weeks early and chat with the sellers to see what they'll have available the first week of April. In many parts of the country, green options will be slim, but you may find salad greens, cabbage, fiddleheads, spinach, as well as root vegetables in cold storage (carrots, potatoes, onions, squash, beets) and apples and pears. Consider making at least one dish all local, and feature it at your Seder.
- **Serve Local, Organic Wine.** Find out ahead of time what your local wine store has in stock—especially if you plan to buy a lot of bottles. If they don't have anything, ask them to order a case on your behalf. There aren't many kosher organic wines available, but one or two are Kosher for Passover. Consider paying a little more at a locally-owned store—sustainable means supporting local businesses, too.
- **Use Recycled or Plant-Based Disposables.** Pesach is a time when many families break out the fine china and heirloom silverware. But if

you're using disposable plates this year, use post-consumer waste paper or plant-based ones.

## Making Sukkot More Sustainable

The Jewish holiday of Sukkot celebrates the Fall Harvest. We are told to sleep, eat, and relax outdoors in our sukkah. On this holiday that is all about the environment, we should be more mindful of the impact that our celebrations have on the world around us. Here are some ideas:

- **Host a Sustainable Sukkot Meal.** It is a mitzvah to eat in the sukkah on the first night of Sukkot. Invite your guests to bring dishes that include local, sustainable ingredients.
- **Go Vegetarian.** Celebrate the bounty of the harvest by eating a vegetarian diet during the week of Sukkot.
- **Recycle and Reuse.** Commit to using only reusable or recyclable plates and cutlery in your Sukkah. In addition, you can recycle your lulav and etrog! For some creative ideas on ways to reuse your lulav and etrog check out- <http://jcarrot.org/shake-and-reuse-lulav-etrog>.
- **Host a Sustainable Kiddush During Sukkot.** Serve local apples and honey, salads made of seasonal produce, and egg salad made out of local, organic eggs.
- **Compost!** Start your parsley plants on Tu B'shevet with the soil you produce from your Sukkot scraps!
- **Take the Sukkot Locavore Challenge.** Eat only local foods on the Shabbat during Sukkot. Want a bigger challenge, include the first and last days of Sukkot. Want to take it a step further? Commit to eating only foods produced within 250 miles for the entire week of Sukkot.

Sign up for NOFA's Locavore challenge- <http://www.nofany.org/events/ny-locavore-challenge/>

For more ideas on hosting a sustainable simcha, check out the "Green and Just Celebrations" guide put out by Jews United for Justice <http://org2.democracyinaction.org/o/5483/signUp.jsp?key=1190>. This guide focuses on simchas in the Washington DC area but has ideas that can be used anywhere.

## Texts on Food and Mindfulness

### Seeing again, for the first time

Because we eat two, three or four times every day, it's easy to forget how wondrous that is. It's like the sunrise or the sunset. The sun rises and sets every day. If it's an especially beautiful sunrise, we may notice it. But if it's not "special" we may not even see it.

But if we can see it as if for the first time, each sunrise becomes very special and very beautiful. And so with each meal we create.

– Bernard Glassman, *Instructions to the Cook*

### Radical Amazement

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.

Radical amazement has a wider scope than any other act of man. While any act of perception or cognition has as its object a selected segment of reality, radical amazement refers to all of reality; not only to what we see, but also to the very act of seeing as well as to our own selves, to the selves that see and are amazed at their ability to see.

– Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*

### Eating a Tangerine

I remember a number of years ago, when Jim and I were first traveling together in the United States, we sat under a tree and shared a tangerine. He began to talk about what we would be doing in the future. Whenever we thought about a project that seemed attractive or inspiring, Jim became so immersed in it that he literally forgot about what he was doing in the present. He popped a section of tangerine in his mouth and, before he had begun chewing it, had another slice ready to pop into his mouth again. He was hardly aware he was eating a tangerine. All I had to say was, "You ought to

eat the tangerine section you've already taken." Jim was startled into realizing what he was doing.

It was as if he hadn't been eating the tangerine at all. If he had been eating anything, he was "eating" his future plans.

A tangerine has sections. If you can eat just one section, you can probably eat the entire tangerine. But if you can't eat a single section, you cannot eat the tangerine. Jim understood. He slowly put his hand down and focused on the presence of the slice already in his mouth. He chewed it thoughtfully before reaching down and taking another section.

– Thich Nhat Hanh, *Miracle of Mindfulness*

### Gratitude means noticing

Why is eating a vegetable one of the steps to freedom? Because gratitude is liberating. And how do we get there? We focus on the details.

Close your eyes: You are holding a piece of parsley, which you are about to dip into salt water. But before that – what things needed to happen to get this parsley into our hands? Who placed the parsley seeds into the ground? What sort of conditions did it grow in? Was it a hot summer? What did the soil feel like? How was the parsley harvested? What did it look like at that perfect moment when it was mature and ready to be picked? Who picked it? Where did the parsley travel next? Was it packed into cardboard boxes? How did it travel to the store or farmer's market? Who unloaded and unpacked it? Who placed it on a scale and weighed it so it could be purchased? Think for a moment about the number of hands that played a part in getting the parsley to this table and into our hands.

Now open your eyes: Look a little more closely at the parsley in your hand – what does it look like? How many leaves does it have? What does that specific color green remind you of? What does the stem feel like? Imagine what it tastes like...

Take a piece of parsley and dip it in salt water. Then we say the blessing together, and then we eat. Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who brings forth fruit from the earth.

– Leah Koenig (*Pesach 2006*)