



## Footsteps of our Fathers - Avos Chapter 3:4 FEEDING TIME WITH GROWTH

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Today the Rubin tribe went on an outing. Summer vacation is drawing to a close, and soon everyone will climb back onto the treadmill of the everyday. As a last gasp of holiday oxygen, Zeidy (that's me) took a whole crop of grandchildren on a special trip - "special" meaning not too far or too exerting so said Zeidy doesn't become totally exhausted. My criteria were met by discovering a huge aquarium where the children could see real fish not born in a tin can.

The highlight of the visit was the feeding of the fish at the koi pond. Koi are yellow and white carp that are highly valued for their colors; some are worth thousands. This particular pond was stocked with hundreds of these beauties, most of which were a foot long. Over the loudspeaker came the announcement "In two minutes we will be feeding the koi." From all sides people came running, and of course we joined the throngs, although the idea of watching fish eating dinner didn't necessarily excite me.

In came the feeder fellow, a huge pail in hand, and he started throwing food pellets into the pond. All of a sudden, the waters came alive with jumping fish. It was as if they were one of a whole - thrashing about, pushing and diving. Mouths gaped open, snapped at the morsels, and then sank again below.

We, the onlookers, watched in awe. The sight of such an open and natural feeding frenzy was both shocking and fascinating. One could overhear comments from the crowd, words of wonder mixed with a certain disquiet. One heimishe Yid was heard saying, "That's nothing! You should have seen the chevra eating kugel at my son's bar mitzva."

Truth be told, I am sometimes amazed at the way many of us descend upon tables at simchas. It makes people wonder if some of us have ever seen food before. The Mishna tells us, "If three people eat at one table and do not discuss words of Torah over it, it is as though they ate of the sacrifices of the dead." Without a spiritual dynamic, eating can become a fressing frenzy. If, however, we connect our neshamos with that which we eat, then "this is the table

בס"ד



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that is before Hashem” (Avos 3:4).

Tzaddikim have long shown us that eating can be an act of Divine worship. The whole essence of a Rebbishe tisch is to teach us this truth.

I myself have seen great troubles put to rest over a can of tuna fish. It’s true, I really have.

Years ago, when we first came to Manchester, we had the merit to host a large number of young university students from all over the world. It is a little-known fact that back then, the city of Manchester was home to the largest body of university students in the whole of Europe, and among these thousands were a large contingency of Jews. Since our shul sat right in the middle of what has now become the main area of student housing, during term time the shul is abuzz with these young people.

As the local Rav, I was the recipient of all kinds of she’eilos and had my fair share of opportunities to resolve problems that seem to be attracted only to such young minds. You must understand that to a student his problem is most pressing. Nothing else matters, and to say differently can put you in their eyes as somewhat uncaring and thoughtless.

I clearly remember one particular ruckus; I was nearly knocked over by two students engaged in a dispute over kitchen rights in their shared digs. For the uninitiated, digs is the word used for student accommodation. It usually refers to a dilapidated apartment that the Department of Health would never allow a family of wayward mice to live in. (Rumor has it that the very word digs is derived from what parents do when they first cast eyes on the state of how their well-brought-up offspring choose to live, as in “digging one’s own grave.”)

The dispute in question had swiftly turned into a religious matter. One disputant claimed his level of kashrus far exceeded his roommate’s, who was probably as observant as a mashgiach in a shrimp factory. The second fellow felt the first guy was living with the delusion that he was the author of the Shulchan Aruch or at least the Mishna Berura.

You can imagine just from this rough outline that the quarrel was intense, and on one sunny afternoon, it pitched up to my front door. “Rabbi, we can’t go on like this. I can’t eat from the kitchen! This guy is treifing it up!”

“Yes, and hello to you, too,” was my answer as these words spewed forth upon my opening the door.

“Rabbi,” yelled the next boy, “this guy is nuts. He’s driving everyone insane!”

“Eh, why don't you two come in? Let’s not have this out on the street.”

I led the two antagonists into my kitchen. “Sit down, calm down and let me get you something to eat. I’m hungry.”

They sat down. Steam seemed to be coming out of their heads. The Rebbetzin A”H was out, so it was up to me to furnish any hospitality. I did as I always do in such circumstances. I opened up a can of tuna fish, scooped in a spoonful of mayonnaise and put it all on one dish with a few crackers on the side. “Make a bracha,” I said, admiring my culinary expertise. “Make a bracha, and then we’ll talk.”

As the three of us dug into the single plate of food, a sort of magic set in. I could feel walls dropping. We were sharing in this most basic of acts. There were no forks or knives (I did mention that the Rebbetzin was out), our fingers measured each bite, and one made sure there was enough for the other. We could share; we could recognize the other’s needs - there was room on the plate for others. Yes, “this is the table that is before Hashem.”

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The mishna speaks of a table where words of Torah are not discussed and compares it to eating sacrifices of the dead. This need not refer only to relating a vort, although that is obviously of great merit. It may also be telling us that the actions and thoughts at that table must be Torahdik. For what can be more dead than the isolation one creates by not truly sharing?

How rich life would be if we could learn to open ourselves up to give of ourselves as well as share the weight of burdens others have. One of life's hardest lessons is that everyone has difficulties in coping with the many trials we all face. All too often, people don't really see others as multifaceted human beings. In fact, they don't even see their true selves. Instead, they create a phantom being of what they would like to be. This phantom becomes who they think they are, and it denies and hides the human nature we were given to use to grow.

The story is told of the great distress the family of the Rebbe Rav Liebele Eiger, zt"l, felt when Reb Leibele first came to Kotzk. Reb Liebele was the son of the well-known and highly respected Rav Shloimele Eiger, a gaon and wealthy activist. Moreover, he was a grandson of Rav Akiva Eiger, the world-renowned Gadol Hador. Both of these Torah giants were misnagdim, and for their child to run off to the wilds of Kotzk was unbearable.

Reb Shloimele sent a distinguished emissary to fetch his wayward son home. Upon arriving in Kotzk and entering the beis medrash, he almost fainted at the sight he beheld. Tens of young chassidim were traipsing back and forth, deep in thought, but to his eyes, doing nothing. He approached one young man and asked where Rav Liebel Eiger could be found. "Rav Liebel Eiger?" sang the chassid. "Never heard of him."

The dignified emissary soon found himself surrounded by a crowd of wild-looking chevra. They were dressed in shabby clothing, and he felt that their manners left much to be desired. Still, he had a mission to fulfill, so he kept up his questioning of the whereabouts of his Rav's son. To each request he received the same answer: "Rav Liebel Eiger? Never heard of him!"

Finally, an elderly, sagely looking man appeared, and upon hearing the stranger's request, he threw back his head with a laugh. "Ah, Liebele - Shloimele Akiva's is who you want? We've sent him out to buy some drinks for the seudah."

The emissary was dumbstruck. To use the fledgling young genius for such a menial task was beyond all boundaries of propriety.

Perceiving the shock that registered on the emissary's face, the elderly chassid whispered in his ear, "My friend, in Kotzk we learn that each one of us brings his inborn human and animalistic drives to the table. No man gets away from them. It's what we do with this realisation that makes us grow."

Yes, it may even be a simple can of tuna. Who is to say where we stand? But if we make such simple stuff into the stuff of our souls, even this can be a table of Hashem.